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A PIVOT IN TIME

A Pivot in Time
(Alien Artifact Book 2)

Douglas E. Richards

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Published by Paragon Press, 2020

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First Edition

PART 1

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

—Saint Augustine (Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, Fifth Century)

1

The man chained to one iron leg of a heavy marble bench had no idea where he was.

Or *who* he was.

He had no idea that he had been born in Berlin, Germany, as Otto Richter. Or that he had taken on a new identity while still in his teens, becoming Jim Connolly, and had gone on to carve out a wonderful life for himself in Spokane, Washington.

For the moment, Jim Connolly knew nothing. He was a creature of pure sensation and no reason. He only knew that he felt a cool, hard floor beneath him, a smooth wall at his back, and heavy iron cuffs around his wrists, while the rest of his towering mind struggled to reorient itself back to a universe of only three spatial dimensions.

He couldn't conjure up *either* of his two identities if his life depended on it. Which might soon be the case. Especially if he couldn't recall the reason he was presently in chains.

It never even occurred to him to wonder *when* he was. And this was perhaps the most important question of all.

Bits and pieces of consciousness and memory returned. He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter as he fought for understanding. His mind, perhaps the sharpest in human history, was strangely blunted, and what he would normally have assimilated in an instant took him several long seconds to process.

Jim Connolly barely managed to stifle a gasp as he finally remembered that he had traveled into the past, and that loss of consciousness and extreme disorientation were expected results. Not that he had any personal experience. This was his first time-traveling journey—and he intended to return to the future as soon as possible and make it his last.

He began to remember more of his life. As Otto Richter he had been a scientific prodigy, torn from his family and home in Berlin

when he was sixteen and pressed into service on the highest-profile superweapons program Hitler's Third Reich had ever undertaken.

But those days were long past, and he had been Jim Connolly, the American, for far longer than he had been Otto Richter. So long, in fact, that he couldn't recall the last time he thought, or even dreamed, in German.

He desperately wanted to travel through time again, *immediately*, and get this episode behind him, but he realized he needed to fully recover before doing so. But how much time would be sufficient?

Perhaps the AI embedded in the cube-shaped alien object, whose limitless power had brought him to this time, could offer guidance. It was often maddeningly unhelpful, but since he was only asking a simple question relating to his personal health, he had high hopes it would answer.

"Cube AI," he called out with his thoughts, trying to get its attention. He had taken to calling it *Trek* in the future, but this version wouldn't yet know that. "*Where am I, exactly*? *And how much recovery time would you recommend before I jump again?"*

Connolly waited to hear its telepathic response in his head, but after several seconds there was nothing. It often refused to supply answers, but it always at least acknowledged his questions.

"Cube AI, please respond!" he thought at the alien AI once again, mentally screaming the words with all the strength he could muster.

There was still no reply. Which meant only one thing. The cube wasn't in his immediate vicinity. Experience had taught him that the onboard AI wouldn't converse telepathically if he was greater than fifty yards away from it.

He had no doubt that it *could* do so. In fact, he wouldn't have been totally shocked to learn that it could receive and transmit thoughts from the other side of the galaxy. But the things it *could* do, and the things it *would* do, were often quite different, as it obeyed complex and often inscrutable programming.

At least this refusal to allow long-distance communication was a rule that made some sense to him.

The cube could exist in two distinct modes, active and inactive.

When the cube was in its inactive form—which presented the most glorious, daunting, and spectacular sight any human could ever imagine—it didn't matter where it was kept, because it couldn't be wielded, or stolen. No power on Earth could budge it even a micron from the protective gravity well it created around itself, which caused it to weigh the equivalent of hundreds of millions of pounds.

But when it was in its less-showy *active* form, it was the most dangerous and powerful object in the Solar System, including possibly the sun, and it could be easily wielded—and moved.

So it was sensible that the alien AI wouldn't let the object be telepathically remote-controlled from great distances.

If you created a nuclear device that even a child could trigger, you wouldn't want your designated owner to let it too far out of sight. And the cube's destructive power made a nuke look like a *squirt gun*.

The cube's very existence made it clear that humanity was still in its technological infancy, and was a species that had repeatedly shown a barbaric willingness to harness power for destructive ends. So the advanced builders of the object had made sure that even those humans sophisticated enough to unlock the cube were forced to obey a proximity rule.

The cube's AI would typically only communicate with the first person it encountered in its active state whom it deemed to be worthy. Which meant someone it believed intended to use its power for constructive, rather than destructive, purposes.

But even those with only destructive, power-hungry motives could use it. They would just have to deploy the alien artifact manually—by touching certain glyphs.

If the AI *did* deem you worthy, on the other hand, it would help you wield the cube. In a sense, you would become its boss.

Until it decided that you *weren't* its boss. Or decided not to answer your questions.

The man who was once named Otto Richter took a deep, silent breath. He had counted on the cube being stubborn. What he hadn't counted on was waking to find it no longer *present*.

Since time travel required the same cube present and active in

both its past and future, anchoring a time portal on both ends, it *had* to have been just a few feet away from him when he had arrived.

The reason why this was no longer true was entirely unclear.

Connolly opened his eyes just a hair and took in his surroundings. He was in a residence that spoke of great wealth, especially for the day. The floor he was on was a colorful tiled mosaic, depicting men in togas among various leaping hounds. Numerous well-appointed rooms and a courtyard swam into hazy view, illuminated by natural sunlight flooding through the courtyard and window-shaped openings high up on the walls. The walls were made of plaster, colored a maroon hue, and paintings, sculptures, and ornate pillars gave the residence the feel of a tiny museum.

An olive-skinned man was sitting nearby at a circular table made from pink marble, reading from a small parchment scroll, deep in thought. A wicked double-edged dagger, almost eight inches long and two wide, was near his hand on the smooth tabletop, well out of his prisoner's restrained reach.

Connolly studied his captor through lidded eyes, and, despite the menacing presence of the dagger, was immediately impressed by what he saw. Even reading, and deep in thought, the man exuded a magnetic presence, perhaps due to his movie-star looks, or perhaps his posture—relaxed yet confident, self-assured without being arrogant.

He seemed calm, centered, at peace. His raven-black hair was short and shimmered with health and vitality, and his tanned face was clean-shaven, revealing a strong jaw and a perfect masculine symmetry. His brown eyes sparkled with life and intelligence that seemed to radiate outward in a way that was nearly mesmerizing. And this without him even knowing he was being watched or turning on any charm.

The man, dressed in a simple tunic and leather sandals—as was Connolly—also looked benevolent somehow, but the time traveler decided this was probably wishful thinking on his part.

Still, even though Connolly was presently chained, he was also alive and uninjured. Given the relative brutality and disregard for human life that was so prevalent in this age, this was a big win. He

had taken a significant risk coming to this time, knowing as he did that he would be totally helpless during the blackout period to come.

The process didn't strain the body at all—which was critical given the deteriorating condition of Connolly's cardiovascular health. But it did savage the mind, as a cascading avalanche of incomprehensible sensory input crashed into the center of consciousness with astounding ferocity, arriving from a dimension no human could hope to comprehend, forcing the brain to shut down to survive.

Connolly noted that he could no longer feel the presence of three large handheld road flares that he had tucked into an inner pocket. He had wanted to bring a weapon—just in case he ran into trouble—but the cube had rightly refused. A modern weapon left behind could easily change history.

Trek had finally agreed to let him bring three self-lighting road flares, which could at least be helpful in engineering an escape from danger. He had rigged them to self-activate after twenty-four hours if he didn't use them, making them toys from the future that would take care of destroying themselves.

While their absence was troubling, they couldn't have done him any good, anyway—not while chained to a heavy marble bench.

The lone resident of the room finally looked up, as if sensing his prisoner's change in status from unconscious to awake, even though Connolly's eyes weren't noticeably open. He studied his prisoner calmly, appearing to be as curious as he was wary. "*Salve*," he said softly. "*Quomodo sentis*?"

Connolly blinked rapidly in confusion as his extraordinary mind failed him, as if his neurons were swimming in a sea of molasses. Since he had moved to the United States decades earlier, he had become fluent in over a dozen languages, in addition to the four he had already spoken, picking them up effortlessly and speaking them all without accent.

Finally, comprehension returned, and he recognized this as Latin, which was one of the sixteen languages he had mastered.

"Hello, how are you feeling?" his host had asked him.

He was about to reply when his host changed gears, asking him

the same question in Greek. Connolly noted that the man spoke both languages like a native, which indicated he might have the same knack for languages as Connolly himself.

"*Bene sum*," the time traveler managed to reply in Latin. *I'm fine*. "*Postulantes gratiam*," continued Connolly. *Thanks for asking*.

"I know my presence must have startled you," added Connolly, still in Latin. "And I'm truly sorry about that." He lifted his hands and nodded at his restraints. "So I can't blame you for these. But I promise you, I mean you no harm."

The man smiled broadly, amplifying his already extraordinary magnetism and charisma to stratospheric levels. "As reassuring as that is," he said in amusement, "forgive me for not offering you a sword."

The time traveler smiled back. "Again, sorry for the trouble. My name is *Connolly*, and if you'd be so kind as to unchain me, I'll be out of your hair in no time."

"Connolly?" repeated the man. "An unusual name."

"I'm not from here," said Connolly. He grimaced. "In fact, I'm not even sure where *here is*—at least not precisely. I just know that I'm somewhere in the Roman Empire."

This was all the cube would tell him. That his destination would be several thousand years in the past, within the vast realm of the Roman Empire, and that it would be spring when he arrived, so he could get away with wearing sandals and a homemade tunic.

Trek possessed knowledge both vast and breathtaking, and could at times be quite generous with this knowledge. Unfortunately, it could also be as stingy as a miser, choosing to be helpful or not with no apparent rhyme or reason.

The man at the table looked down at his captive sitting on the floor and shook his head. "Are you really trying to pretend you don't know where you are?"

"I wish I was only pretending. I think I was carried long distances over several days or weeks, kept mostly unconscious, and then left here for dead. My faculties haven't fully returned."

The Roman considered his prisoner for several long seconds. "Interesting," he said finally. "Let me get this right. You were

kidnapped from a far-off land, beyond the borders of the empire. Your kidnappers managed to travel this entire way with you blacked out." He shook his head. "And they went to all this trouble, just so they could drag you into my inner courtyard and leave you there."

Connolly winced. "I know how crazy that sounds," he said.

"I don't think you do. Because when I left my villa it was empty. I'm sure of it. And no one was in the courtyard either, which can only be accessed from inside. When I returned a short while later, you were in a lump on the ground. Yet the door was still locked, and I had the only key."

Connolly was momentarily surprised that locks even existed in ancient Rome, but he quickly realized that he shouldn't have been. He did know better.

In the first century, the Roman city of Pompeii, near Naples, had been buried under millions of tons of volcanic ash, spewed out by the eruption of nearby Mount Vesuvius. When the city was rediscovered almost seventeen hundred years later, many of the homes and shops were found to have been fastidiously locked and barred, secured by the residents before they attempted to flee their own imminent deaths.

"So your abductors must be very impressive," continued his captor. "First, to successfully make such a long journey with you as dead weight. Then, to have the ability to enter and leave my home without disturbing the lock, and to deposit you here as some sort of gift."

He paused. "I appreciate the gesture. But I prefer not to own any slaves, even if they are freely given."

Connolly swallowed hard. "Good to know," he replied. "And for what it's worth, I very much prefer not to *be* a slave."

Not that this mattered, he knew. If he didn't find a way to get out of here, he'd be dead in less than a month, slave or otherwise.

The Roman looked troubled. "Still, even though I don't believe your abduction story, you did manage to break into my home without disturbing the lock. Which shouldn't be possible. I'd be interested to know how you managed it."

Connolly debated telling him the truth but decided now was not

the time. “So would I,” he replied. “But I have no idea. I was as shocked to find me here as you were. Wherever *here* is.”

The man studied him for several long seconds in silence, and then sighed. “We are presently inside my personal residence on Aventine Hill in the city of Rome. In case you don’t know the geography of the city’s seven hills, Aventine is the one closest to the Tiber River, which is to the west of us.”

Connolly nodded appreciatively. While he had known he would land somewhere in the Roman Empire, this realm encompassed much of the known world at the time, so the chances he’d end up in the city of Rome itself were small. “Thank you,” he said earnestly.

“You’re welcome,” said his captor. “But answering your question isn’t a sign that I trust you,” he added. “I just find it hard to fathom why you would lie about not knowing where you are. So I’ll humor you, at least for the moment. But my patience, while considerable, isn’t endless.”

“Understood,” said Connolly, swallowing hard. He needed to get clearheaded in a hurry and learn what had become of the cube.

As a non-citizen of the empire who had broken into a wealthy Roman’s personal villa, he was at the mercy of the man in front of him. And in this age, he didn’t doubt that his captor would be fully within his rights to kill him on the slightest whim—judge, jury, and executioner-style—and likely wouldn’t lose a second of sleep over it.

Connolly needed to choose his strategy, and his words, with exquisite care.

Because the Roman’s dagger was not there for decoration.

And he didn’t doubt that his life was very much on the line.

2

Jim Connolly glanced at his hands, shackled to the iron leg of a heavy marble bench, and then back at his captor. He needed to quickly establish as much rapport as he could with this man, garner more information, and decide how much of the truth he could risk telling.

“Would it be too forward of me to ask you your name?” he said pleasantly.

The hint of a wary smile crossed the Roman’s features. “I consider myself a good judge of people, but you’re a total mystery to me. I find your reactions and responses unpredictable. You enter through a locked door. You play stupid, and claim to be a stranger from a distant land beyond the empire. Yet you’re obviously sharp, even in a diminished capacity. And you speak unaccented Latin like an educated nobleman.”

“I understand your confusion. At the moment, I’m a mystery even to myself. Perhaps we can solve this together.”

The Roman issued a hearty laugh at the absurdity of this response, releasing another million watts of distillated charm into the room. “My name is Marcus,” he said amiably. “Marcus Dorso. More fully, Senator Marcus Dorso,” he added, not in an arrogant or flaunting manner, but simply as if he sincerely wanted to convey additional information.

This man could well end his prisoner’s life at any moment, but Connolly couldn’t help but like him. Which probably wouldn’t change even as the Roman’s blade came rushing toward his heart.

Connolly had chosen this time period because it was the nearest to his own that he could reach, given the cube’s complex and inviolate rules for time travel. But while he had pressed for information about the precise year and destination, the cube had only given vague responses.

He cursed inwardly. He had been inexcusably sloppy. His passion

was for science, and while he was likely the greatest scientific genius ever born, he was a horrible historian, fixated on humanity's future and disinterested in its past.

Even so, he *had* studied up on the Roman Empire before his journey. Some. Just not thoroughly enough for his current situation.

He had expected to only be in the past a few minutes. This was merely a stepping-stone, a necessary way station. Either he'd be killed while unconscious, or he'd wake up and have the cube send him off to his final destination.

But now, bound in chains with the cube nowhere in sight, his in-and-out mission was becoming anything but, and his spotty knowledge of this time, and this empire, could cost him his life.

He at least had some big-picture knowledge of the Roman Senate. And he was anything but shocked that Marcus Dorso was one of its hundreds of members. The man's bearing was regal, and this explained his obvious wealth and education. Membership in the senate was a very big deal, as prestigious as it got, even during the reigns of the strongest emperors.

Senate members tended to be rich, influential, and live in the hills of Rome, nicely tucked away from the city center, which was packed with uncountable peasants and slaves, and ripe with the stench of human hordes living in poverty and filth.

"Thank you . . . Senator," said Connolly. "And if you could just indulge me while I ask one last wild question, I'd be grateful. My memory must have suffered worse than I thought."

"Proceed," said Dorso.

"What *year* are we in?"

The senator looked confused. "*This* year," he said simply.

"Right, of course. But what year would future historians say we were in?"

Dorso's eyes narrowed. "This is the most unusual conversation I've ever had," he said. "I'm not sure if *you're* crazy—or *I* am."

While the man had said this in jest, Connolly had a sense that this hadn't entirely been the case—which had obvious implications.

"Please, Senator Dorso. The year. It would mean a lot to me."

"It is currently 779 AUC."

The prisoner winced and blew out a long, frustrated breath. "And by AUC, you mean . . . ?"

"My indulgence does have its limits, Connolly," said the senator irritably. "AUC—*ab urbe condita*."

"Of course," said the chained visitor. *Ab urbe condita—from the founding of the city*. And in this case the identity of the city was obvious—Rome itself.

Connolly had never considered how years were numbered in ancient times, because the history books tended to peg all years to the modern system of reckoning. But now he knew, at least in this era, that Roman years were reckoned from the founding of its capital city almost eight hundred years previously.

Which didn't really narrow it down for him any better than Trek had done. He had read of the Roman Empire in general: its customs, languages, dress, politics, and culture. But he had not memorized when the city of Rome had been founded, nor the precise reigns of the various emperors.

He did know that Roman civilization had thrived for at least five hundred years before officially becoming an empire. And he knew the empire phase had begun after Augustus Caesar had conquered Egypt and turned it into a Roman province.

Augustus had become wildly popular after his stunning defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, and the destruction of the Egyptian fleet. So popular, in fact, that the Roman Senate had named the month of August after him, just as they had named the month of July after his father, Julius, before him.

Later, in a masterstroke, Augustus convinced the masses that the coincidental passage of Halley's Comet was really the soul of his father, Julius, ascending into heaven, a clear indication of his divinity. And if Julius Caesar was a god, then Augustus Caesar was nothing less than the son of a god, a divine credential that solidified his efforts to transform the republic into an empire.

Connolly knew little else about the chronology of the empire, or the exact order and duration of the reigns of its emperors. He only

knew that the western half of the empire had finally fallen, more than a thousand years after the founding of Rome, ushering in the Dark Ages in Europe.

The chained time traveler blew out a long breath. Even though he hadn't been able to pin down the precise year, it was time to ask the question he'd been avoiding: *have you seen any cube-shaped alien objects lying around?*

Connolly already knew the answer, of course—Dorso *had* seen the cube—but he hoped this question would open up a dialogue. The problem was that he had no idea what he'd be walking into. Would the question result in the opening of a dialogue, or the opening of his *jugular*?

Connolly had been nearly certain that Dorso had seen the cube from the start, but this had grown into an absolute certainty when the senator had wondered aloud—even in pretend jocularity—if he was crazy.

The cube could cause *anyone* to think they'd gone mad.

So the man had seen it. The real question was, *how* had this come to be? Under what circumstances? And what had happened to the cube between the time Connolly had arrived and the time he had awakened?

And even more important to Connolly's immediate survival, would Senator Marcus Dorso be in an information-sharing mood? Or in a mood to kill the possible thief who knew about the cube's existence, and who was stupid enough to admit it?

3

Jim Connolly braced himself mentally and then gasped. “My memory just returned,” he said happily. “Your answers must have sparked it back to life.”

The senator stared deep into his prisoner’s eyes, as if boring all the way into his soul. “Does that mean you remember how and why you came to be here?” he asked, appearing somewhat suspicious of this instant reversal.

“I do,” said the prisoner. “And thanks for being so patient and understanding.”

The Roman leaned forward, his ruggedly handsome face a picture of concentration. “Go on,” he said.

“Seems I misplaced something. An object. And I thought I might find it here. It’s a small and somewhat . . . unusual . . . cube, with sides that resemble white marble. I don’t suppose you’ve seen it?”

The senator nodded slowly. “I’m glad we can finally stop playing games, Connolly, and have a real discussion. I felt certain that two impossibilities, your presence inside my locked home, and the object you speak of, were somehow related. Good to have confirmation. And while I’m worried that I might be mad, I have no choice but to operate on the assumption that I’m not.”

He paused. “So tell me more about this . . . cube.”

The corners of Connolly’s mouth turned up into just the hint of a smile. The senator was even shrewder than he had thought. While Connolly was feeling this man out, trying to establish rapport, looking for clues about the cube without asking directly, *Dorso* had been doing the same. And he had gotten Connolly to show his hand first, without raising the specter of the cube and without any overt threats of violence.

“Well played, Senator,” he said. “It appears that your patience and understanding while dealing with a befuddled intruder were not

without purpose."

Dorso shot him yet another dazzling smile. "I strive to be patient and understanding in all circumstances," he replied. "But yes, I was humoring you, hoping you'd let slip a link between you and the cube. So I'll ask again, what do you know of it?"

"It's an object of immense power and capability. Beyond anything the world has ever seen. I'm happy to tell you more, but I need you to trust me and unlock these shackles."

Dorso paused for several seconds, staring at Connolly as if he were a specimen under a microscope. Finally, he removed a key from an inner pocket of his tunic and tossed it to his prisoner on the floor."

"Just like that?" said Connolly, surprised.

"Just like that. I trust my gut instincts, and I have a good feeling about you. My gut isn't always right, but I choose to listen to it rather than living in fear. Besides," he added with a sigh, "I'm still not certain that you're even real."

Connolly quickly unlocked his shackles and rubbed his wrists and arms, but made no move to rise from the floor. "Before I tell you more about the cube, I have just a few more questions. First, what happened to the red tubes I had in my pocket?"

"I found them and put them in a wooden box outside the door for study at another time. What are they?"

"Decorative art pieces I bought for use back home."

Dorso didn't look convinced, but he didn't question this further. "What else do you need to know?" he asked.

"I need you to tell me how you found the cube."

"*It* found *me*."

Connolly's breath caught in his throat. "Are you sure?" he managed to croak out.

"Assuming that I'm sane, yes. I was in the courtyard, and it descended gently from the sky, like a falling leaf, landing only a few feet away from me."

Connolly couldn't believe what he was hearing. As far as he knew, the cube could only be unlocked from its immeasurably heavy inactive state by being doused with dark energy. And the technology needed to

make this happen was nowhere near to being perfected, even in the 1940s, when a young Otto Richter had managed it anyway. Only Otto's off-the-charts scientific brilliance could possibly have pulled it off, almost ninety years before the rest of the world caught up to him in 2027.

Before traveling here, Connolly had asked Trek how the cube had come to be active in the days of the Roman Empire, but it hadn't provided an answer. He had assumed that an alien visiting Earth during this time had unlocked the cube and left, forgetting to lock it back down. After Connolly had arrived, he had further assumed that Dorso had stumbled upon it by accident.

But, apparently, it had stumbled upon *him*.

Which changed Connolly's every calculation.

It was clear that a careless alien *hadn't* left the cube active. Instead, Trek had its own purposes in mind.

And if this was the case, for the alien AI to have *proactively* approached Marcus Dorso, the man must be profoundly important in some way—whether this importance was earned or entirely random.

Perhaps he was merely an insignificant butterfly, but one who could inadvertently set off a chain reaction with the flapping of his wings that could have a monumental impact.

Or perhaps he was Mothra himself, a colossus in his own right. It was impossible to say.

"Did it tell you *why* it approached you?" asked Connolly, assuming that if the cube had sought him out, it wouldn't require him to touch the glyph that conjured up the alien AI.

"Did you hear what you just asked?" replied the Roman in disdain. "Did a flying cube *tell me* why it was in my courtyard? As if it were alive. As if it had a mind, and lips, and spoke Latin."

The hint of a smile crossed Connolly's face. "Playing dumb to find out how much I really know?" he said. "Or do you think that admitting the truth is a sign that you're succumbing to madness?"

Dorso laughed. "A little bit of both," he admitted.

"Let me help you, then," said the visitor. "If it's the same cube I'm talking about, it doesn't *need* a mouth. It can speak directly into your

mind."

Dorso didn't reply. Instead, he sheathed his dagger, walked several paces to Connolly, and held out his hand, helping him to his feet. This completed, he gestured toward a second chair at the table. Connolly took the offered seat, and Dorso sat down across from him.

"I'm not sure if I should be relieved that you've confirmed this absurdity," said the Roman, "or even *more* worried."

Connolly sighed. "I'm not sure how worried I should be either," he said. "For different reasons. For me, it depends on what the cube *said* to you."

"It said hello. It told me that I wasn't dreaming and wasn't mad. And that it had been sent here by an intelligence greater than anything present on Earth."

He paused. "It never claimed to be sent by a god, but I took this as the clear implication. What else could it mean by an *intelligence greater than any on Earth*?"

What else, indeed, thought Connolly, but remained silent.

"Despite its reassurances," continued Dorso, "I was sure I had lost my mind. It went on to say that it needed me for an important task it would describe, but that it would follow my orders. I ignored it, hoping my insanity was temporary, and the voice would get out of my head."

"But it didn't," said Connolly.

Dorso sighed and shook his head. "No, it didn't. So I told it I refused to believe it was real, and that it should go away."

"So it followed this order and left?"

"No. Even though it said it would follow my orders, it didn't occur to me to issue this wish as a direct order at the time."

"I see," said Connolly. "So what happened then?"

"It tried to *prove* it was real."

"How?"

"It lifted heavy statues into the air. Then it crushed one of the hundreds of olive trees that encircle my land."

"Did you believe it then?"

"No. If I was imagining the cube, and imagining the voice in my

head, I could be imagining these other impossible feats also."

"Or it could have been sent by a god, after all," said Connolly. "Although you seem to have ruled this out."

"I did."

Connolly was intrigued. The Romans of this time were highly religious and very much believed in the power of their deities. In fact, they attributed their success in conquest to their piety. They took great care to honor, rather than anger, their pantheon of gods. So why hadn't this Roman come to what should have been an obvious conclusion, that this had been a divine visitation?

"Can I ask you *why* you ruled this out?" he said.

Dorso paused for several seconds. "I suppose so," he said finally. "Why not? After all, we're sharing things we'll deny if ever asked, anyway. So I can tell you that I have . . . issues, with much of what my fellow countrymen believe about the gods. Both with respect to their great number, their intrusions into our lives, and their deeds. I find it more likely that they are a human construct, invented so we can explain things we currently find unexplainable."

"I see," said Connolly evenly, not showing just how astounded he was by this response. In Connolly's era this insight into the gods of Mount Olympus would be greeted with nothing but yawns. It would be about as special as concluding that the Earth was round. But in this day, coming from a man raised and immersed in the culture of ancient Rome, it was extraordinarily impressive.

More than ever, Connolly was convinced there was a very powerful mind at work behind Dorso's shining eyes. One responsible for generating as much of his charisma as the man's matinee-idol looks. The senator was almost certainly a genius in his own right. He possessed a proficiency with languages that might match Connolly's own. He was shrewd and articulate. And he had an ability to analyze a situation with both depth and alacrity.

Perhaps in earlier eras, when the lack of technology made dark energy production impossible, the cube sought out the most impressive mind of each millennium.

"So what happened next?" he asked the senator.

“When its demonstrations failed to persuade me, it proposed a different kind of test. One designed to better prove it was a separate intelligence. Not a figment of my imagination, or a splintering of my mind. Specifically, it offered to instantly solve a difficult multiplication problem. One that I would never be able to solve in my head.” He grinned. “No matter how many of me were in there helping,” he added.

Connolly couldn’t help but laugh.

“Assuming the cube’s solution was correct,” continued Dorso, “I would know that it was a separate entity. Because sane or insane, I’m incapable of doing what it was able to do.”

“Fascinating,” said Connolly. “But still not conclusive.”

“No. All of it could still be a delusion. Still, I was intrigued. The very *idea* of the test inched me toward believing that the cube was being truthful.”

“Why?”

“Because I would never have come up with this preposterous idea on my own.”

“So did you conduct the test?”

“I did. I posed a multiplication problem, and the cube gave me its answer instantly. The timing of this test was good, since I was due to attend a meeting at the home of a friend, Octavius Gallus. And the man I needed to confirm the cube’s answer would be in attendance.”

“I don’t understand. Why not just solve it long-handed by yourself?”

Dorso laughed. “You did hear me, right? I posed a multiplication problem. One difficult enough to give an expert mathematician a headache. And I don’t even own an abacus.”

Connolly’s eyes widened. Of course. Another aspect of ancient civilization that he had failed to consider, like the dating of the years. Most history books focused on impactful events and pivotal figures in ancient Rome, not on relatively mundane aspects of everyday life.

Nothing in his research had bothered to emphasize that simple math, which any modern fifth-grader could do, would be exceedingly difficult for a Roman to accomplish. Because a fifth-grader could use

Arabic numerals. And a zero.

But in Rome, this wasn't possible. Multiplying MDCCXXIII by LLLSSVI wasn't for the faint of heart. Carry the V, and add a C?

"Right," said Connolly. "Of course. But lucky for you, a math expert and his handy abacus would be at this meeting of yours."

"You're repeating what I just said, but yes. So I left for the meeting on horseback. The cube wanted to accompany me, but this time I thought to explicitly 'order' it to stay where it was. And it complied. Which, again, could still have been part of the same demented delusion."

Dorso paused. "My home was out of sight behind me," he continued, "when I heard a faint sound, like the crack of a whip, coming from that direction. Even though it was faint when it reached me, it must have been extremely loud where it originated. So I decided to ride back home and investigate."

Connolly sighed. Time travel was one of the least stealthy endeavors one could imagine. As if blacking out weren't bad enough, a time traveler's arrival was announced with a whip-crack sound so loud it could wake the dead.

He had tried to mitigate the danger, asking Trek to send him back to the first instance after the cube's activation when it had been left unattended. Provided it ever *had* been. And provided he could land safely. Which meant that the cube hadn't been left alone underground, in a pool of lava, in a lion's den, or somewhere equally inhospitable.

If the cube had self-activated and had immediately launched itself into the air until it landed in Dorso's courtyard, this would explain why he had arrived when he had.

"When I got back home," said Dorso, "I found you near the cube. Out cold on the ground. And the door lock hadn't been disturbed."

"So you chained me here and left to attend your meeting—and to find your math expert."

"Yes and no. Yes, I still needed to attend my meeting. But no, I decided I wouldn't check the cube's answer after all. Your impossible appearance right next to it was the last straw. It was madness stacked upon madness. I refused to give this object any more credence. I

ordered it to be silent and it obeyed, which I took to mean that I had quieted the other half of my own splintered personality. And since it was clearly the focal point of my madness, I was determined to get rid of it."

Connolly winced. "Please tell me that you didn't."

"I did. I passed a small grove of trees on my way to Octavius's home, about three hundred paces away from it, and hid it under some loose dirt and leaves."

Connolly let out a sigh of relief. The Roman unit of distance was the *mille passum*, or "thousand paces," which turned out to be very close to a modern mile. If Dorso had left it only a third of a mile from his friend's home, he would remember exactly where it was.

"We need to retrieve it," said Connolly.

"We can't. It isn't there anymore. After the meeting, I decided that I should dispose of it more permanently. So I wouldn't be tempted to seek it out again."

Connolly closed his eyes and braced himself. "So where did it end up?" he asked.

"I rode to the Tiber River and threw it in."

The time traveler groaned. "Well, that's not . . . ideal," he said miserably.

"Ideal or not, it changed nothing. I thought you were a delusion that would disappear once I disposed of this cube-shaped apparition. Yet here you still are. And you seem quite rational, yet you respond differently than I would myself. An indication that you aren't a figment of my imagination. And you also believe the cube is real."

"It is."

"Then perhaps my action was a bit . . . hasty."

"We still might be able to reverse it."

"I don't see how. But we can have that discussion later. Right now, it's your turn to share. Tell me everything that *you* know about the cube."

"Of course. But first, can you tell me how long I was out for?"

"About three hours."

Connolly winced. A long time. The duration of a Roman hour

varied depending on the season, but it was a close enough approximation. “And you never learned why the cube approached you?”

“No. Other than what I told you already, that it needed me for an important task. It tried to explain further, but I insisted it wait until I checked its math.”

Jim Connolly suddenly had a knot in the pit of his stomach. “So because of my arrival, you got rid of the cube and never checked its math.”

“That’s right.”

“If you had checked, and learned that it was right, would you have heard it out?”

“Yes,” said the Roman senator simply.

Crap! thought Connolly anxiously. *Crap, crap, crap!*

By interfering with the AI’s plans, his appearance here could have *disastrous* consequences.

Seeking Dorso out like it had was *well* beyond the range of the AI’s programming. Which made it *unprecedented*. *Monumental*. So it must have had a *very* good reason for doing so.

But if Connolly had interfered with a critical course correction the cube was trying to make, why had the future version of Trek allowed him to travel back to this place and time? Was his interference *also* part of the plan?

Or had future Trek just been completely unaware of the devastating consequences that would ensue if he was sent here?

This last was likely, he realized. The alien AI had been programmed with strict rules about information exchange. It forbade anyone in the past from sharing information with their future selves, and thus influencing a future version’s actions. Perhaps this rule applied to it, also.

Further analysis was a waste of time. He didn’t have enough information. Even if he did, time travel logic was treacherously thorny. And this was before adding the unknowable vagaries of an alien mentality and AI programming into the mix.

Besides, who could possibly guess why the cube did anything it

did?

But if Connolly had interfered, just what was it that he had interfered *with*?

If the cube's plan was evil somehow, bad for humanity, and bad for the timeline, then his interference was a godsend. But while the cube could be secretive and annoying, his experience suggested it had humanity's best interests at heart.

Unless its programming had glitched—or been tampered with.

Again, no way to know without additional information.

The only way forward he could see was to reverse the impact of his interference. Retrieve the cube. Learn its purpose in contacting Dorso. If it could convince Connolly that this purpose was benevolent, he would get the hell out of here, as planned, and let it proceed.

Trek was superintelligent, after all, so he was convinced it would make sure the cube was retrievable should Dorso change his mind. It would adjust its own gravity once it hit the Tiber River so that it sank to the bottom, fifteen to thirty feet below, rather than being rushed away downstream.

All Connolly needed to do was convince the Roman senator to return to where he had jettisoned the cube and order it to resurface. Connolly, himself, should be able to issue such an order, even if Dorso wouldn't, assuming the telepathic AI was still taking instructions from him. In his experience, it interacted with only one worthy human at a time. But it was becoming clear that its rules weren't as absolute as he had been led to believe.

He could salvage this still.

Jim Connolly almost jumped out of his skin as the door to Dorso's villa burst open.

Two Roman legionnaires rushed across the threshold, swords drawn.

The startled senator shot up to his feet to face the intruders, and Connolly followed suit.

"Senator Marcus Dorso," announced the lead soldier, "by order of our commander, Lucius Sejanus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard and regent of Rome, you are under arrest for high treason against the

empire. Surrender or die."

Connolly swallowed hard. The Tiber River and the alien cube suddenly seemed farther away than ever before.

4

The American visitor couldn't shake the sense that he was in a bad movie, dressed as he was in a Roman tunic and staring at two legionnaires, right out of Hollywood casting, each wearing armor and an iron helmet, and each brandishing a shield and a distinctive short sword, called a *gladius*, which had become an indispensable weapon in the Roman quiver.

But as unreal as the situation felt, the charge of treason against Dorso was *absolutely* real—perhaps lethally so—and the weapons the soldiers were holding were anything but props.

Worse, Connolly suspected that the senator was guilty. Dorso had been startled by the sudden intrusion of the soldiers, yes, but he didn't appear surprised by their charge of treason, which he would have been if he were being framed.

And in the instant before Dorso got his emotions completely under control, his face had reflected rage—but not *outrage*. Horror—but not *injustice*.

Connolly vaguely remembered that the Praetorian Guard was an elite group of soldiers, many thousands strong, tasked with the protection of the emperor and the city of Rome. They had played a key role in power struggles throughout the duration of the empire, and while founded to *protect* emperors, the Guard itself had often posed the most dangerous threat of all to imperial power.

The fact that soldiers in this powerful, esteemed military unit had barged into the senator's home with claims of treason was truly a worst-case scenario.

The question that most plagued Connolly now was this: If he had never arrived in the past, would Dorso still have been in his home when they had come to arrest him? Had part of the cube's pitch been to convince the senator that a noose was beginning to tighten around his neck and that he needed to escape?

“There must be some mistake,” said Dorso calmly to the two soldiers who had taken up positions just inside the open door, almost twenty feet distant, their shields now on the floor and propped against the wall. “Leave now and I’m willing to forgive this intrusion.”

“No mistake,” said the spokesman for the pair of soldiers, the taller of the two. “The fact that you’re wearing a dagger in your own home is suspicious enough. But Praetor Sejanus has overwhelming evidence against you. He’s coming here himself, so save your protests.”

“Then give me your names,” demanded Dorso defiantly. “I need to know just who it is who dares to threaten a standing senator.”

“Of course,” said the taller guard, and his lack of concern at Dorso’s threat spoke volumes. “I’m Drusus Getha, and my comrade is Appius Pulex.” He gestured toward Connolly. “While we’re at it, why don’t you introduce us to your fellow conspirator.”

Dorso shook his head in disgust. “First, there *are* no conspirators. Because there *is no* conspiracy. Second, this man is one of my servants. A cook. We were discussing upcoming meals. Even if I *was* guilty—which I’m not—this man is completely innocent.”

“Maybe so,” said the soldier. “But he isn’t going anywhere. We’ll let the regent sort out his innocence or guilt.”

Drusus Getha approached the senator, his sword still drawn, while his shorter comrade produced two pairs of iron restraints from a pack he was carrying.

“Toss your dagger my way, Senator,” said Getha. “And I need both of you to open your tunics to show me you possess no other weapons.”

Both men did as they were instructed. When Getha was satisfied that they were unarmed, he gestured for his comrade to approach them.

Dorso glared at the two intruders but extended his arms, wrists together, in resignation, awaiting the approaching shackles.

Getha pointed the tip of his sword at Connolly’s chest and shot him a look of contempt. “You too!” he barked. “Arms out!”

“Hold off for just a moment,” said Connolly, hoping he didn’t sound as panicked as he felt. He *could not* let Dorso be taken into

custody under any circumstances.

He stared Getha in the eye, trying to ignore the racing of his challenged heart, which had begun beating at dangerous speed and intensity. “I’ll cooperate,” he continued. “I will. *More* than cooperate. I can unravel everything. What your praetor knows is only the tip of the iceberg.”

The soldiers exchanged confused glances. “The *what*?”

“The tip of the iceberg. A small fraction of the whole. You know, because most of an iceberg is below the surface.”

The soldiers blinked stupidly but remained silent.

“Let me put it another way,” said Connolly. “There is a lot I can tell Sejanus about the senator and his conspiracy that he doesn’t know. A lot. And I’ll even help him bring down others. Under—”

“This man is lying,” interrupted Dorso. “He knows nothing. He’s only trying to save himself. Don’t listen—”

“Silence!” shouted Getha. “Another word and I’ll cut off your thumb. The praetor wants you taken alive, but didn’t specify uninjured.” He turned to Connolly. “Continue with what you were saying?”

“I can be of great help to you and the praetor,” said Connolly. “The regent,” he added, unsure of which of Sejanus’s titles to use. “Under one condition.”

“Which is?” said the man.

“You and your partner have to back off, out of earshot, and let me have a brief, private discussion with the senator. Explain my betrayal.”

“This is just a trick so you can escape.”

“From the most elite soldiers in the empire?” said Connolly. “Unarmed? Really?”

Getha considered this for several seconds. Finally, he motioned for his comrade to retreat back to the villa’s entrance. “You make a good point,” he said. “So have your private discussion. But do it *quickly*. And I expect you to hold up your end of the bargain.”

“Of course,” said Connolly as they continued retreating. He couldn’t believe this had actually worked. He certainly wouldn’t have

allowed it if he were in their shoes.

When both soldiers had retreated to the door, still in sight but out of earshot, Connolly braced himself for an angry tirade. One he deserved. He had done nothing but lie and make Dorso look guilty.

Instead, the senator was a picture of calm, looking more curious than irate. “What’s this about?” he asked simply. “You went to a lot of trouble to have some private words with me.”

“You were about to give yourself up without a fight,” replied Connolly in low tones. “I can’t let you do that.”

“Why, because I’m innocent?”

“We both know you’re not.”

“Whether I am or not is immaterial. Sejanus has no trouble fabricating false evidence against anyone he wants to remove, guilty or not. I thought he had satisfied his bloodlust after his last purge, but apparently not. Trust me, I’m dead no matter what. But if I cooperate, I may be able to save *your* life. Which at least gives my last hours meaning.”

Connolly was stunned that the senator was taking what he believed to be an inevitable death so calmly, and that his first thought was to try to save the life of a stranger who had appeared in his home uninvited.

“I appreciate the thought, Senator,” he said, continuing to keep his voice low and speaking almost as quickly as an auctioneer, not knowing when the guards’ patience would run out. “But I should be sacrificing myself for *you*. We have to escape. You’re much too important to just accept this fate.”

“I might have been important before. But now that Sejanus is on to me, I’m worthless.”

“The cube is a powerful force,” whispered Connolly, still speaking at warp speed, “and a powerful intelligence. One that I believe is looking out for the good of the Roman Empire and its people. Since it sought you out, you must be immensely important. It may have approached you now to warn you that Sejanus was coming. But regardless of timing, it needs you for some reason. And nothing is more important than finding out what that reason is.”

“Important or not,” whispered Dorso, “we have no chance. Even if we did miraculously escape, the entire Roman army would be after us before we traveled a mile.”

“Enough!” shouted Getha from twenty feet away. He caught Connolly’s eye. “You’ve had more than enough time,” he continued. “And you had better give the regent the help you promised.”

The soldier paused. “Now arms out, both of you.”

“Trust me!” Connolly whispered quickly to Dorso, knowing he had mere seconds before his words could be overheard. “If we can get past these men, the cube can protect you. Follow my lead.”

Connolly had practiced martial arts for more than ten years. For the physical conditioning, to strengthen a cardiovascular system he knew was failing, and to hone his mental discipline.

His training was ideal for this situation. He favored judo and jiu-jitsu, disciplines that had perfected weaponless techniques for use against armored enemies—precisely what he needed now. Disciplines that relied on using an opponent’s strength against him, emphasizing balance, movement, force, and direction—defense rather than offense—such that the fighting techniques employed were more about physics than about smashing mouths.

Connolly took several long strides to get in front of the Roman senator and threw his arms out in front of him, as if awaiting shackles.

Getha held his sword at the ready, while his comrade sheathed his own blade and moved to clamp restraints around Connolly’s hands.

Just as the shorter legionnaire was reaching toward him, Connolly dropped to the floor and used a leg to sweep the soldier’s feet out from under him, pushing him backwards as he did so to ensure the man couldn’t use his hands to brace his fall.

Instead, the soldier crashed down *hard*, landing on his shoulder blades, with the back of his helmeted head jackknifing down immediately and slamming into the unyielding tile floor with a loud *crack*, knocking him out instantly, his metal helmet amplifying rather than cushioning the fall.

Getha reacted even before his partner’s head hit the ground, lunging at Connolly with his sword like a charging bull, as Connolly

had hoped he would. Aggression and boldness were prized in the Praetorian Guard, but Getha was blissfully unaware of the existence of a set of combat techniques that had been designed to take advantage of these very tendencies.

Connolly sidestepped the charging legionnaire and the outstretched blade at the last moment and grabbed his sword arm, pulling him in the direction of his momentum and deflecting him headlong toward a nearby wall. To his credit, Getha instinctively realized the need to drop his weapon and managed to get both hands in front of him to lessen the impact before his head hit the wall.

Connolly moved immediately to kick the guard's fallen sword out of reach, but Getha recovered much more quickly and expertly than Connolly had anticipated, spinning back around while drawing a hidden dagger and slashing at his adversary, carving a bloody, half-inch-deep gash across Connolly's right shoulder.

Connolly screamed in agony and fell to the floor. His heart pumped furiously, not from exertion, but from the combination of adrenaline and pain, and he began to feel dizzy. His doctors called this dizziness pre-syncope, and it was brought on by a heart arrhythmia. If his heart didn't stop racing soon, his blood pressure would plummet and he would lose consciousness. It had happened before.

Connolly's fighting technique was superior, and he knew exactly what moves he needed to make next, but he was in a catch-22 situation. If he stopped fighting to quiet his heart, he was dead. But if he did fight, he'd pass out, and he'd be just as dead. A lose-lose scenario.

He somehow managed to lift himself from the ground and stumble out of Getha's reach, trying to will his heart to slow, but the guard was in no mood to give him time to regroup. This time he didn't charge headlong at Connolly, having learned from his mistake, but approached slowly, relentless, now holding a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Connolly's dizziness intensified and he fell to the floor once again, rolling onto his back before becoming all but paralyzed. Now helpless, he could only watch in horror as Getha lifted his sword handle above

his head with both hands, intent on impaling his adversary and pinning his body to the ground as if he were a prized specimen in a bug collection.

Just as Connolly was about to slam his eyes shut so he wouldn't see the blade plunging into his chest, he heard a loud thud, and the tall soldier toppled to one side of him, while the man's sharply pointed sword fell straight down, missing Connolly's unshielded torso by mere inches.

Connolly could now see Marcus Dorso standing where Getha had been a moment before. Dorso had been behind the tall legionnaire and hidden from view. The senator was still clutching a small marble statue of the god Jupiter, which Connolly realized he had slammed into Getha's helmeted head—literally not a moment too soon.

The senator dropped to where Getha had fallen and checked for a pulse, before rushing to the soldier's fallen comrade and doing the same. "They're both still alive," he said to Connolly, sounding genuinely relieved.

He thrust his hand out toward the time traveler to help him up. "Let's get out of here!"

"I can't," whispered Connolly, fighting to focus with a brain starved of blood and oxygen. "Heart issue. Need to stay until it slows. Go without me."

Dorso knelt beside him and shook his head. "Deep breaths," he said anxiously. "And don't speak."

"Go!" insisted Connolly, trying to be as forceful as he could, but this command came out so faintly it was almost inaudible. "Save yourself. Find the cube. Order it to tell you . . . what it can do. Then . . . use it . . . to ensure safety."

Dorso shook his head. "I need to staunch your bleeding," he said softly. "In the meanwhile, think calm thoughts and try to relax. I'm not leaving without you."

Connolly wanted to argue further, but the last of his strength was ebbing from his body, and he wasn't able to utter a single word.

Instead, his eyes slid shut, his mind shut off, and he fell into the deep, dark abyss of unconsciousness.

PART 2

“Dark energy and dark matter are out there. And they’ve shaped the entire history of the universe.”

—Phil Plait, Astronomer

5

Spokane, Washington, 2027

Major Justin Boyd gazed into the sparkling green eyes of his wife, Kelly Connolly, now Kelly Connolly-Boyd, as her incandescent smile lit up the room. She was wearing a simple, lightweight dress bought in 1943, and was surrounded by elaborate Halloween decorations, including a floor-to-ceiling spiderweb, and a five-foot-long furry tarantula, whose bulbous abdomen she had used to hide the most valuable object that had ever existed.

Somehow, she managed to look right at home in this setting, as though it couldn't have been more normal. And for good reason. Because this was the most normal setting or circumstance they had been in for well over five months now.

The major glanced at the giant stuffed spider sitting beside her, as if it were the family dog, and couldn't help but grin. He couldn't imagine loving anyone the way he did her. And no one could have possibly imagined how this romance had come to be.

It had begun with a kiss in the back seat of a car while hiding from enhanced Chinese commandos in 2027, and had proceeded to an epic session of lovemaking in the hold of a Nazi cargo plane in 1943.

Remarkably—*inconceivably*—they had overcome impossible odds to achieve the three miracles that had brought them here. Dodging a nuclear holocaust on a Chinese island by escaping into the past. Finding a way to avoid certain death at the hands of the Nazis, all the while keeping history intact. And finally, finding a way to make it back to their home era, to reappear in 2027 inside the home of a friend in Kelly's neighborhood, where Colonel Tom Osborne was waiting.

Osborne, in charge of all of America's black operations programs, was Boyd's superior officer, but much more than that. The colonel had been like a second father to him since he had been recruited into Enhanced Human Operations, or EHO, fifteen years earlier, at the age

of seventeen.

Boyd could hardly believe that he was now sitting on a comfortable couch, safe and relaxed, in the company of two people who meant the world to him. He had even been reunited with the AI assistant he called Sage, which resided in a supercomputer that was once again affixed via high-tech bandage to his thigh.

All that was missing was his duffel bag filled with indispensable items from his commando days—including drones, weapons, and first-aid—which he had begun to keep with him whenever he could, even after his job had become less combat oriented.

But all in all, he felt as if he were the luckiest man alive. He hadn't just fallen into a pile of excrement and come back out with a diamond. He had been far luckier than that. It was as if he had been thrust into a wood chipper, and the machine had stalled out just as the first blade was about to strike—choking on a diamond the size of a *golf ball*. A diamond that had turned out to be *magical*.

Now *that* was luck.

Even so, their success had come at a high cost. He and Kelly had both been forced to commit horrible atrocities in the name of preventing even worse. They would be emotionally scarred by these actions for the rest of their lives. Actions that included convincing Tom Osborne to kill their future selves so that *they* could take the places of these future versions.

But despite this terrible baggage, Boyd couldn't help but feel euphoric to be back in his own time.

Not that he hadn't enjoyed 1943—at least *after* they had fought off the Nazis and relocated to America. It was certainly a simpler time. And he had relished having the chance to bond with Kelly's wonderful eighteen-year-old grandfather, Otto Richter, whose identity they had helped change into that of an Iowa-born American named Jim Connolly. Still, Boyd hadn't realized just how much he had missed his own time, a longing that went well beyond just a return to modern technology and conveniences.

They had reemerged in 2027 a day or two earlier than they had left it. Which was less than a week after he and Dr. Kelly Connolly had

met for the first time.

But so much had happened since then, so much had changed, that their first meeting seemed as if it had taken place a thousand years ago.

He couldn't possibly have known when he first laid eyes on Kelly Connolly how many dramatic twists and turns were in store for him. Couldn't possibly have fathomed the extent to which his life would be upended, along with his understanding of the nature of time and reality.

His life had never been normal—far from it—but at least it had seemed *sane*. He was an enhanced commando, tapped by Colonel Osborne to become the next head of American black ops when the colonel retired. In preparation for this transition, Osborne had asked him to visit a number of black site laboratories around the country, to get up to speed on their activities and to meet key personnel.

So his existence hadn't been *vanilla*. He hadn't exactly been an accountant at a ball bearing plant. But at least his life had operated within the bounds of imagination.

Until he had visited Spokane, Washington, for the first time, and Project Uru, the most classified, most important black site of all. There he had met with Dr. Harry Salazar, Project Uru's director, and Kelly Connolly, an accomplished physicist already, at the tender age of thirty, who looked even younger. Kelly was a key department head at Uru and possessed a fun, feisty personality even more compelling to him than her girl-next-door beauty.

Within minutes of Boyd's visit, it became abundantly clear to him why this particular project was so special. Harry Salazar and his team had been tasked with studying an alien artifact they called the Enigma Cube. A mesmerizing object of *incomprehensible* power. A cube the size of a softball, which Salazar believed contained technology so advanced it made the most sophisticated human technologies seem like Stone Age relics by comparison.

Boyd had soon seen this extraordinary, mesmerizing cube for himself, and had learned that it weighed millions of pounds, making it as immovable as Thor's hammer. It had also proven itself to be

impervious to all efforts to affect it. Nothing known to science could as much as scratch a single atom, including explosives, lasers, magnetic fields, acid, and temperatures ranging from the coldest to the hottest mankind had ever produced.

Boyd could never have guessed at the time just how quickly, and profoundly, that was about to change.

"Justin," said the voice of his new wife, breaking him from his reverie. "Justin?" she repeated. "Are you with us?"

"Of course," he replied after a brief delay, shaking his head to clear it.

"You had a grin plastered on your face and a faraway look in your eye. Thinking about anything interesting?"

"Just about how happy I am to be back in 2027 with the woman of my dreams. And how lucky I am to have found you."

Osborne groaned. "*Way* too sappy, Justin," he said, rolling his eyes. "I get it, you're in the romantic stages of love. But keep this up, and I may start puking. And I'll probably have to kill you."

The colonel winced as he realized what he had said, and that it was nothing to joke about. Not on the same day that he had, *literally*, killed Justin Boyd. In fact, he had vaporized his friend and protégé to make way for a time-traveling duplicate not much more than an hour earlier.

"Anyway," he began again, "I'm really going to need you to, you know . . . keep it in your pants."

Just after saying this the colonel turned to Kelly, looking somewhat embarrassed, as if he had momentarily forgotten she was there. "Sorry. I should have put that another way."

She grinned. "No need. I'm not always so prim and proper myself."

"One of the many things that I love about her," said Justin. "And I know that the *woman of my dreams* thing was a bit sappy, but Kelly did ask me what I was thinking about."

"Are you trying to say it's *my* fault that you made your friend sick to his stomach?" said his new wife with a twinkle in her eye.

"Well, you have to take *some* responsibility for making me fall

head over heels in love with you."

"Did you not hear me?" said Osborne, feigning exasperation. "You're an elite commando with tens of millions of dollars of enhancements on board. I get that part of you is now a lovesick puppy wrapped in marshmallows." He produced an exaggerated shudder. "But maybe wait to share that side of you until you and Kelly are alone."

"Right," said Boyd, smiling. "It won't happen again."

"And who says *head over heels* anymore, anyway?" continued his commanding officer. "I think you might have spent too long in 1943."

"Could be," said Boyd, but his smile soon disappeared, to be replaced by a frown. "Speaking of 1943," he added, gesturing to the front entrance of the borrowed home they were in. "I almost expect Otto Richter to walk through that door at any moment."

Kelly nodded wistfully. "I was thinking the exact same thing just a few minutes ago. He'd be over a hundred years old. But with his scientific genius, anything is possible."

"He does have a habit of making the impossible seem easy," said Justin.

"Who's Otto Richter?" asked the colonel.

"My grandfather," said Kelly. "He was eighteen when we left him."

"Your eighteen-year-old grandfather?" said Osborne in dismay. "You tracked down and got to know your *grandfather* in 1943? Wouldn't that be a risk to your future?"

She nodded. "Absolutely. But we didn't track him down. It's a lot more complicated than that. He couldn't be more vital to what happened to us in the past. The message we had Sage transmit to you to get you to . . . *pave the way* for our arrival," she added, deciding that *pave the way* was a nicer way to put it than *vaporize our other selves*, "only gave you a broad outline of what we experienced. But we'd be happy to begin filling you in."

She held up the small cube that was sitting beside her, which Osborne had removed from the abdomen of the Halloween decoration sitting on her other side. It had a glossy finish that looked like white

marble and, while slightly bigger than her palm, was easy for her to grasp with the fingers of one hand. “And I can give you a demonstration of some of the things this little powerhouse can do.”

The colonel shook his head in wonder. “Hard to believe that something that looks like a simple decorative sculpture is really the Enigma Cube.”

“And ironic,” said Kelly. “When it’s in its immovable, mind-melting, all-powerful form, it can’t affect anything.”

Boyd flashed back once again to the first time he had seen the cube in all of its glory. In its inactive form, it wasn’t even a solid cube, it was an open cubical cage, with blinding beams of light that streaked from each of its corners. Within this outer cage was an ever-changing geometric figure, which appeared to be spinning at a furious pace and also to be utterly motionless, seemingly at the same time. The cube pulsated with energy that seemed truly limitless. It was mesmerizing in every way. Otto Richter had described it as *throbbing with the infinite, like an entire star shrunk down to cubic form*.

But once Otto had trained his dark energy generator on it, it had transformed. The blinding beams of light emerging from its vertices vanished, and all six faces of the cube suddenly filled in, turning it into the form that Kelly now held in her hand.

Otto had also found that if he pressed his fingers on all four vertices at the top of the cube, and held them there for several seconds, fifteen hieroglyphs suddenly materialized across the cube’s faces, blazing red, as if they were on fire, even though they were cool to the touch.

Kelly set the cube back down beside her and the hint of a smile crossed her face. “Are you ready, Colonel?”

“You can’t imagine *how* ready,” he said. Then, with a heavy sigh, he added, “But before you get started, we should decide on Harry Salazar. Do we bring him into our exclusive little group? If the answer is yes, we should wait to begin until he’s here. No use repeating yourselves.”

Just after the two time travelers had appeared and regained consciousness, they had convinced Osborne to head a new team to

study the cube—given that they were now able to control much of its power. Project Uru had been the most classified operation in US history, but by going rogue they would ensure this new program was even more so. No one who wasn't in the group itself would be allowed to know it even existed, including the US president and secretary of defense. And it would be self-funded, drawing on the sizable personal fortune that Boyd and Kelly now possessed.

"What do *you* think, Colonel?" said Boyd, throwing the question back to his commanding officer. "Do you trust Salazar? Can he handle something like this?"

"I think he can, yes," said Osborne. "He strikes me as a good man." He turned to face the woman who had worked with the director of Project Uru for some time. "What do you think, Kelly? You know him best."

"He *is* a good man," she replied without hesitation. "And I'm confident we can trust him."

"Good," said the colonel. "Then I say we get his ass over here immediately. He's losing his mind trying to figure out how an immovable object walked out of his facility last night. I mean, totally *losing his mind*. So let's explain what happened and put him out of his misery."

"Will he accept a lesser role?" asked Boyd. "Right now, he's the head of Uru. In the new reality, he'll be fourth in charge, behind the three of us."

"He won't see it as a demotion," said Kelly. "All he cares about is solving the mystery of the cube. He'll be *ecstatic* that we've unlocked it, and eager to study it, regardless of rank."

"Then it's settled," said Osborne. "I should be able to get him here within fifteen minutes."

Kelly sighed. "Let's not meet here," she said. "I feel guilty enough about how much I've intruded on my friends' home while they're away."

A nauseated expression flashed across her face. "And I need to check on something in my house," she added anxiously. "Why don't we reconvene there. It's just down the block."

“Done,” said Osborne simply.

“Good, Justin and I will walk over, and you can join us when Harry gets here.”

The colonel nodded.

Kelly rose and picked up the cube once again. “I don’t have my keys anymore,” she said. “Can I assume the people who tore my home apart didn’t bother to lock back up behind them?”

Osborne winced. “They didn’t lock up, no,” he said. “Or clean up. And however bad you imagine the mess to be, I’m afraid it’s much worse.”

6

China's president, Yu Shi, rose from his desk to glare at the incoming transmission, a perfect holographic projection of the Minister of Chinese Intelligence, Yang Delan. Yang's face was as handsome as ever, and his figure was trim and muscular, something that was apparent even through the immaculate uniform that covered it.

A uniform that many men, without Yang's hardy constitution, might have soiled upon seeing the rage in the eyes of China's paramount leader.

Yu Shi was a dictator who prided himself on his ability to come across as a cuddly, affable father figure. While he cultivated this image for consumption by the masses, the truth of his nature was precisely the opposite.

And he couldn't have appeared more dangerous, more ferocious, than he did now. His expression was menacing enough to get a rabid werewolf to whimper in fear. He was irate, and for good reason. Just over an hour earlier, the most important operation China had ever undertaken had gone down in flames. It had been an unmitigated disaster.

Their initial target had been Major Justin Boyd, an enhanced supersoldier with intimate knowledge of all American black operations. His capture would have represented an intelligence coup of epic proportions.

But, incredibly, just the night before, his companion, Dr. Kelly Connolly, had become an even more important target. Almost inconceivably more important. She had become the key to solving the alien cube, which both China and America possessed, making her capture a priority unprecedented in all of China's history.

Not only had they failed to capture either target, they had so far

failed to locate the cube the Americans were studying, which Kelly Connolly had taken. And this was despite the efforts of what seemed like half of China's intelligence apparatus, and every last available human asset that they had on the ground, including scores of well-paid mercenaries.

"Esteemed president," said the intelligence minister quickly, managing not to stammer as so many others would have done in this situation. "Apologies for not contacting you immediately. I was told that you couldn't be disturbed. That you were in an important meeting."

"I was!" spat Yu through clenched teeth. "A meeting to discuss your *incompetence*."

Yu was the most tyrannical dictator in modern Chinese history, and prided himself on this fact. Despite his public persona as a humble shepherd who loved his flock, he was ruthless and uncaring. He saw all but a few of China's teeming masses, over 1.5 billion strong, as insignificant peons, utterly expendable. Each as disposable as a paper plate, and nearly as worthless.

Not that he engaged in mass extermination and purging. He didn't need to. But if this became necessary, it wouldn't trouble him in the slightest. After all, kill one man and you're considered a murderer. Wipe out all life on an entire planet, with the exception of the occupants of a wooden ark, and you're considered a *god*.

Still, despite not caring about the fate of any individual or group within his country, Yu cared deeply for the fate of China as a whole, as ethnocentric as any ruler had ever been. The lives of his own people may have meant nothing to him, but the lives of everyone else in the world, combined, meant far less. And he saw China's eventual domination of the globe as unstoppable. As Manifest Destiny. The United States had presented a large roadblock to this ambition for decades, but they were too soft and too easily bought off for this to last long.

Soon, China would take its rightful place atop all nations, including the US, dominating the globe more fully than any in the Third Reich could ever have dreamed.

Not that he would need to resort to the slaughter of the 1940s to gain control—or to keep it. All he needed was modern technology, already perfected in China. His control of his own country was now total, and more invasive than fascists of old could imagine. Computers, cameras, and algorithms had made 24/7 surveillance and monitoring of billions laughably achievable, along with swift and brutal punishment.

He would simply need to take this system worldwide once China became supreme, as it relentlessly continued to expand its might and influence across the world in ways that wouldn't be fully noticed until it was too late.

It was Orwell's surveillance state come to life, except it would require very few humans in the loop. Drones could be made in the millions to extend the arm of the secret police and as enforcers.

Not that violence would be needed, except on rare occasions. A flip of a few electrons in a computer could create devastating misery for anyone on the planet, blackballing them from modern civilization in a way that would be crippling. They would be unable to use credit cards and public transportation. Banned from the internet and all forms of electronic entertainment. And worst of all, they would become pariahs, shunned by those who didn't want their own social scores lowered. Once they fell into this hell, most would sell their own mothers to get on the right side of the algorithm, to be able to access the Web and return to society's good graces.

Yu shot his minister of intelligence a look of contempt. "What do you have to say for yourself?" he demanded.

"I take full responsibility for this failure, esteemed president."

"What happened! How did it go so wrong?"

Yang shook his head. "It's still unclear, but I promise I'll find out. Commander Shen contacted me seconds before the explosion and reported all was going perfectly. Justin Boyd and Kelly Connolly were trapped inside their car and had arrived dead center at the ambush point—exactly as scheduled. There was no sign they, or anyone in American intelligence, had any idea what was happening. And for an op this important, I had hundreds of our best people watching

satellites and monitoring signals, and there wasn't a hint that they were on to us."

"Then how do you explain it?"

"I can't, President Yu. It makes no sense. Apparently, the ambush site, a large clearing in the woods of Pennsylvania, was laced with powerful explosives."

"Don't tell me what I already know! I was watching the satellite feed in real-time."

Yu shook his head in disgust as he recalled what he had seen. One moment there was a Lexus sedan and twelve people in a large clearing, and the next the clearing contained nothing but a massive fireball, so powerful and blistering hot that not even skeletal remains could be found afterward.

Yu shot his underling a look of contempt. "That clearing was mined with enough explosives to wipe out a city block," he said. "How could you not know they had been planted there?"

"A satellite was watching this patch of ground from the first moment Commander Shen chose it for the ambush. There was no activity there whatsoever. Which means that the explosives had to have been planted *before* we chose this site."

"That's impossible."

Yang nodded miserably. "I agree. Unless the Americans found a way to interfere with our satellite feed. Feed us false imagery while they planted the explosives. Very hard to believe, and something that would still require them to know all about our plans."

"So someone must have turned traitor."

"It's quite possible."

"Do you think they got to Commander Shen?"

"No. I'd stake my life on Shen's loyalty."

The president of China curled his upper lip into a sneer. "Believe me, Minister Yang, you have."

Yang swallowed hard, but managed to keep his face impassive. "There are other aspects of this that don't add up," he continued. "In addition to vaporizing the clearing, the Americans also killed five of our enhanced commandos, and captured five others, who were

waiting in the woods a mile or so away. Judging from the manpower and weaponry they brought for the job, it was as if they *knew* these men were enhanced."

Yu nodded slowly, taking it all in.

"Finally," continued Yang, "why did the Americans kill their own? If they had enough advanced warning to plant explosives, they could have easily seen to it that their people avoided the trap."

"Perhaps they discovered that Dr. Connolly had stolen their cube, and this was punishment."

"Excellent thought, esteemed president. But I would be surprised if this were the case. She only took the cube last night, and we believe the explosives were planted well before that time. And the Americans are soft. They wouldn't do this publicly. The fireball they created did not go unnoticed, so they now have a lot of questions to answer. If they wanted her executed, they could have sent a single operative to take care of this in a way that appeared accidental, and out of the public eye."

There was a long silence as Yu considered, his rage beginning to climb once again.

How had this happened? How had the Americans turned the tables so completely?

Yu glared at his subordinate with a withering intensity. "You're supposed to be my minister of intelligence!" he shouted. "Not my minister of unanswered questions! So get me some answers!"

Yang shrank back, ever so slightly, but didn't respond.

China's paramount leader paused for several seconds, trying to regain his composure. "For now," he said more calmly, "there is one thing we know for certain. They now have Commander Shen and five of our enhanced soldiers in custody. What are your recommendations?"

Yang blew out a long breath. "I believe we have to . . . terminate them, esteemed president."

"Why?"

"We can't let the Americans study the enhancements we've perfected. Even more importantly, they have no idea we possess a

cube of our own. But Shen does. And he knows its location. We can't risk that they'll find a way to break him."

"It's good to see that you haven't completely lost your edge, Minister. So how would you kill them?"

"A difficult problem, esteemed president. They will be taken to America's most secure facility. So the challenge will be to kill them without starting World War III. I will study the problem and present a recommendation to you in short order."

"No need," said Yu in disdain. "That's what I was doing for more than an hour after your op blew up in our faces. Key members of the politburo agree with my recommendation. We have no choice but to deploy *Starlance*."

Yang's eyes widened. "That would be . . . extraordinary," he said.

Yu understood the minister's surprise. Starlance had been perfected just two months earlier, after a breathtaking scientific breakthrough. But the few who knew about this weapon had been told its use was to be avoided at all costs. It was to be deployed only as a measure of last resort. At least for now. A single use would alert the international community to its presence, which they wanted to avoid for as long as possible.

"Do you agree that we should use it?" said Yu.

"I do, esteemed president."

"Why? You don't think it's too high a price to pay?"

"I do not, President Yu. The cube contains technology thousands of years ahead of ours. Whoever unlocks this treasure trove will control the world. No price is too high to ensure that we win this race. While Commander Shen has been conditioned to hold out under questioning, we can't chance that the Americans will learn about our cube. And letting them learn how our soldiers are enhanced would also be a major setback."

"All true," said China's president. "And while we hoped to keep this new weapon for a rainy day, I admit to being eager to see it in action."

This was an understatement. Starlance was a toy that Yu desperately wanted to take out of the box, despite the immediate

depreciation in value this would represent. He'd have a front-row seat to watch the fireworks on a satellite feed, and he'd enjoy giving the current US administration something to think about.

"Can you track Commander Shen?" Yu asked, changing gears.

"We can," replied his minister of intelligence. "He has a tiny plastic beacon implanted in his skull."

"Won't this be discovered?"

"Usually that would be true. But this version uses the new signal technology we've developed, making it undetectable and unblockable. It is providing both his location and vital signs even now."

"Is he alive and conscious?"

"As of this moment, yes."

"Can we talk to him?

"Yes, esteemed president. He has a receiver implanted deep within his ear, one that would require surgery to identify or remove. And it, too, makes use of our new signal transmission technology, so our communication will be undetectable. Unfortunately, while we can talk to him, he won't be able to respond."

"That will have to be good enough," said Yu. "Because I want him back. I've found him to be quite impressive. He may be able to answer some of these questions of yours. And he knows more about Kelly Connolly and Project Uru than anyone else. I want him here so he can be debriefed."

"Understood, President Yu. Given the authorization to use Starlance, a plan is already coalescing in my mind. I ask your permission to leave this call to set some things in motion that may be time sensitive. Once this has been completed, ten or fifteen minutes from now, I would be honored to present my plans at length for your approval."

Yu stared into the eyes of the perfect hologram in front of him for several long seconds, then finally nodded. "Permission granted," he said.

7

Kelly opened the door to her home and was greeted by a sight she found hard to even process. The colonel had been right. Her house was in worse shape than she had expected, even after his warning.

If she didn't know better, she would have sworn her home had given birth to a raging tornado, which had torn through every last inch of it. The word *shambles* didn't begin to do justice to the thorough destruction the swarm of Chinese operatives had managed, and the wanton disregard they had shown for where the fallout landed, picking the house apart like ravenous locusts.

They had been desperate to find where she had hidden the cube, and had demolished her home to find out, leaving no possible hiding place unexplored. The drywall had been torn open throughout her home and all carpeting ripped out by the tacks, falling back to the floor haphazardly when nothing was discovered, bunching up and rarely flat.

Cupboards and desks had been obliterated, and every inch of insulation patted down like a criminal undergoing a full body cavity search, including the insulation in her attic. Toilet lids had been torn off tanks and dropped to tile floors, and mattresses, pillows, and cushions had been slashed and turned inside out, with their colorful fillings now bursting out like the intestines of some slaughtered beast.

"Nice place," said Justin Boyd impishly as they entered and closed the front door behind them.

Kelly couldn't help but laugh, but only because it hurt too much to cry, and her reality had changed so dramatically that the loss of her home barely registered in importance in the scheme of things.

"It's looked better," she replied, raising her eyebrows. "I had no idea you'd become my husband when I left it last. If I had, I might have, you know, given the place a good dusting before you saw it for the first time."

“They do say that dusting post-apocalyptic wreckage makes all the difference.”

Kelly tried to fake a smile but couldn’t quite manage it. Instead, the deadly somber expression she had been fighting off became frozen on her face like it had been cast with quick-dry cement. “As much as I’d love to keep things light,” she said, “we have to find out if they took Otto’s journal. That’s all that matters right now.”

Boyd nodded grimly. “I know.”

Kelly’s home could be rebuilt, or even discarded, especially now that she and Justin were worth hundreds of millions of dollars from the blue chip stocks they had bought in 1943. But China possessed a cube of its own, and if the Chinese operatives who had torn through here managed to get their hands on her grandfather’s journal, they’d learn the key to activating their cube. If they ever managed to accomplish this, it would be a disaster of epic proportions, no doubt having a devastating effect on the future course of human civilization.

Absolute power corrupted absolutely, which is why the couple had elected not to put the cube in the hands of US leadership. And if US leaders couldn’t be trusted with power and technology this transformative, China’s new leader, Yu Shi, certainly could not be, as he was turning a great nation more firmly totalitarian with every passing year.

Kelly led Boyd into a den behind the great room, which featured an oak bookcase. The bookcase was now in splinters on the floor, and hundreds of books were scattered around it like multicolored autumn leaves around a now-barren tree.

She carefully set the cube down and began to frantically rummage through the many haphazard piles of fallen books, purchased over the decades in addition to the thousands she had read electronically. But the more books she surveyed or pushed aside without finding what she was after, the more panicked she became.

Her head began to spin, and she felt as if she were suffocating. The intruders had found it. They must have.

She moved aside a massive volume on cosmology, which had a crystal-clear picture of dozens of colorful galaxies on its cover, and

drew in a sharp intake of air, finally allowing herself to breathe again.

Her grandfather's journal! She had found it!

It had been waiting patiently under the cosmology tome, and now looked back at its caretaker innocently, as if not understanding what the fuss was all about. The journal was a faded brown in color, made of soft leather, and was held closed by what looked like a leather boot lace tied gently around it, passing over a title plate that Kelly had added, which read "Connolly Holiday Recipes."

She snatched the volume from the ground and hastily undid the leather tie, finally allowing herself to be hopeful. Sure enough, the pages inside were intact, and almost certainly unread.

Kelly felt waves of relief wash over her and fell into Boyd's arms in celebration, not saying a word. He held her close as she squeezed her eyes shut and took deep, therapeutic breaths, reveling in their good fortune.

She had expected the holiday recipe title to ward off unwanted inspection more powerfully than garlic warded off vampires. Unless a trespasser was looking for tips on preparing corned beef and cabbage for St. Patrick's Day. Even so, if one of the operatives had bothered to look at a *single* page, he would have known he had hit the jackpot.

Luckily, the journal was too small to contain the Enigma Cube, and the intruders had no interest in anything else.

"Can I see it?" said Boyd when they separated. Kelly handed him her prize, and he marveled at how worn the leather had become, showing every bit of the eighty-four years it had been in existence.

He had been there when Kelly had purchased it in 1943, after searching a dozen stores for a new version of the exact leather journal that she had come to know so well in 2026. And he had been there when Sage had dictated the journal's contents, which it had uploaded from Kelly's phone, so that Otto could copy these exact words onto its pages in his own handwriting, ensuring history would repeat itself.

Boyd was saddened as he leafed through it, finally forcing himself to accept that the extraordinary Otto Richter was truly gone. As much as Boyd wished it were otherwise, Otto must have turned to dust decades earlier, having left the journal for his granddaughter to find

in 2026, as promised, ensuring she would learn about the cube and find a way to join Project Uru.

Boyd had come to love the boy like a much younger brother, and missed him already, even though they had just parted hours before.

As he was handing the journal back to Kelly, they both heard the distinct clap of the front door closing. Kelly snatched the cube from the ground. “Good timing,” she said, as she and Boyd quickly made their way back through the debris field to the front of her home.

The colonel and Harry Salazar were standing just inside the door, and Salazar’s mouth was hanging open as he surveyed the wreckage.

“Termites,” said Kelly when she and Boyd entered the room. “I should have tented.”

Upon seeing the two of them, Salazar’s mouth dropped even further, and his eyes bulged.

“I can’t tell you how great it is to see you again, Harry,” she added, and the weight of emotion behind these words made it clear to him that she was strangely serious.

“How can you *be* here?” he asked in dismay. “We spoke just a few hours ago—and you were in *Pennsylvania*.”

“Right,” said Kelly as the almost six-month-old memories came flooding back. “You called to tell us the cube was missing. Seems longer than two hours ago, somehow,” she added dryly.

Prior to their lengthy sojourn in 1943, Salazar had called them in a panic, just before their self-driving Lexus had been abducted and forced to drive to a clearing in the woods, one packed with twenty mercenaries and ten enhanced Chinese commandos.

“You were in a car, and not even close to an airport,” said the current head of Project Uru. “Even the fastest classified military jets aren’t *that* fast. How did you get here so quickly?”

“Less quickly than you might think,” said Kelly.

Salazar stared at her as if her words weren’t registering. Which was almost certainly true. His mind was nearing its breaking point, overloaded by a missing immovable cube, the state of Kelly’s home, and the incongruity of seeing her and Boyd in Spokane. And he was ignoring the cube in her hand, not imagining for a moment that it

could be the same one that he had just lost.

"And your *clothing*," he continued in a confused trance. "Your *hair*. You both changed them. To a style that was out of date at the dawn of time."

Kelly struggled not to grin, which would have been disrespectful of Salazar, who was entirely dumbfounded. And rightfully so. She had almost forgotten that she was still wearing the clothes she had put on that morning in 1943, and so was Boyd. Both wore their hair short and pulled back to reveal their foreheads. She was in a lightweight, blue cotton dress, cinched with a thin leather belt, and he wore pleated cotton slacks and a button-down shirt, the likes of which could no longer be found in any store in the country.

"Sorry about the confusion, Harry," she said. "But Justin and I will explain everything."

"The colonel told me to get here fast because he had discovered what happened to the cube. Is this true, Kelly? And is *he* the one with the answers, or are *you*?"

"It's true," she confirmed. "And Justin and I are the ones with the answers."

Salazar turned to the colonel. "Why didn't you tell me that Kelly was here? Or that her house had been ransacked?"

"You were flustered enough after losing the cube," said Osborne. "And you wouldn't have believed they were here until you'd seen for yourself, anyway."

"Why don't we get comfortable and start," said Boyd, changing the subject. He surveyed their surroundings once again and made a face. "And by *comfortable*, I mean finding a good pile of wreckage to sit on."

Kelly shook her head. "I think we can do better than that," she said with a smile. "Follow me," she added, leading her three companions into the kitchen. As she had hoped, all six of her kitchen chairs were intact, as they had thin wooden bases and spindle backs, leaving no room to hide a cube. Her glass table remained intact for the same reason, although cupboards and drawers had been demolished and their contents now covered the floor.

She pulled a chair up to the table and gestured for her companions to do the same.

When they were all seated, she nodded at Boyd. “Do you want to kick things off, Justin?”

“No, you should. This is your story, and you and Harry are close.”

The affection the two newlyweds had for each other was unmistakable, even while discussing the mundane. Harry Salazar was poor at reading body language, but even he couldn’t help but read this message.

“Why do you two seem so comfortable together all of a sudden?” he said warily.

“A lot has changed since we spoke over the phone, Harry,” she said, setting the cube down on the table. “*A lot*. So let me start with the big picture, and Justin and I can fill in the details later.”

Salazar nodded at the object on the table. “What’s with the white cube?” he asked.

Kelly considered telling him, but decided it was best to wait a few minutes. Once this cat was out of the bag, he wouldn’t let her proceed until she answered at least a hundred questions. “I’m hoping it will bring us luck,” she said finally, which wasn’t entirely a lie.

Kelly held up the soft leather journal for all to see. “This is where it all began,” she said. “It’s the key to everything.”

“A recipe book?” said Osborne in disbelief.

Kelly laughed. “Wow, that little placard works wonders,” she said. “It turns out that this isn’t filled with holiday recipes. It’s a personal journal. Written by a scientist of staggering brilliance named Otto Richter. It describes certain events, beginning when he was a sixteen-year-old boy in Berlin, Germany, in 1941.”

“Otto Richter?” repeated Harry Salazar, searching his memory. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“It wouldn’t,” she replied. “The Nazis kept him under wraps. I only found out about him through this journal. And I only discovered this journal because Otto was my grandfather.”

“Your *grandfather*?” said Salazar, blinking in confusion. “You have a grandfather who was born in Nazi Germany? I thought all of your

ancestors came from Ireland."

Kelly nodded. "So did I," she replied with a sigh.

8

Kelly placed her grandfather's leather journal on the glass kitchen table beside the Enigma Cube and tried to block out the clutter and destruction that surrounded the four inhabitants of the room.

"As a last reminder," she said, "I intend to keep this short and to the point. It's a first pass only. After that, Justin and I can fill in any gaps for as long as you'd like."

The colonel and Harry Salazar both nodded.

"I found this journal in 2026, before I joined Uru," she began, and then launched into the story of Otto Richter, a prodigy who had taught himself multiple languages by the time he was four, and calculus by the time he was six. A boy whose genius was so well known, even to Hitler and Himmler, that they had ripped him from his family to work on a top-secret project. A project to discover the secrets of an extraordinary, immovable cube the SS had found in Canada, while searching for artifacts that would prove Aryan superiority. A cube that was so extraordinary that Himmler was convinced it had come from Atlantis itself, a kingdom he believed had been built by a race of pure Aryan supermen.

The same miraculous cube that had ended up in Spokane, and which had been studied by Uru.

She went on to detail how young Otto had ultimately found a way to unlock the cube from its immobile state by dousing it with dark energy from a generator he had built, which had allowed him to discover what its active form could do.

"Impossible!" said Harry Salazar at this point in her narrative. "You can't tell me that a boy in 1943 was able to build a dark energy generator. Modern science couldn't even manage this until just a few weeks ago."

"I told you that Otto was good."

"No one is *that* good."

“I get why you’re skeptical,” said Boyd. “But let’s move on. Because there’s a lot more coming that’s even harder to believe.”

Salazar and the colonel exchanged glances, but both nodded in agreement.

Kelly went on to describe how Otto had learned that the unlocked cube could control gravity. Effortlessly, and with exquisite precision. Including the gravitational pull on itself, meaning that it could be made to be light as a feather, going from the equivalent of many millions of pounds to something a child could effortlessly carry.

And it wasn’t just able to control gravity, but anti-gravity as well —both sides of the ledger. Which meant it could mold the structure of spacetime, itself, like a potter molding soft clay.

For the colonel’s benefit, she explained that Einstein had shown that all matter deformed space, and that this was entirely responsible for the gravitational effect. When a planet dented the fabric of spacetime in its vicinity, for instance, other matter nearby was forced to roll down the new curvature thus created. This might result in the lesser mass colliding with the planet, being deflected in its path, or coming to a stable orbit around it.

Harry Salazar looked absolutely stunned. Being an accomplished physicist, his mind had seized upon the implications immediately. “If the cube can dial gravity up and down,” he said, “and *anti-gravity* also, the implications are truly *staggering*. This level of control of spacetime would transform *everything*. It would bring unlimited free energy. Faster-than-light travel. Wormholes would become possible. Black holes. Potentially interdimensional travel—and even time travel. With enough power and know-how, you might even be able to create entire new universes.”

“Exactly right,” said Kelly, beaming.

“Slow down,” said the colonel. “Faster-than-light travel? The creation of entirely new universes? Really?”

“Universe creation is a long shot, I’ll admit,” said Kelly, “but it’s still theoretically possible.”

“Just by controlling gravity?” said the colonel skeptically.

“In this case by controlling *anti*-gravity,” she replied. “The most

widely accepted theory of the birth of our universe is called *Cosmic Inflation*. It suggests our entire universe was born from a primed particle almost infinitely small. This remarkable speck of matter suddenly experienced the mother of all repulsive forces, an anti-gravity to end all anti-gravities.

"I won't get into the why and how of it at the moment. But this ultra-potent anti-gravity force blew up a minuscule speck into our early universe—where it then continued to expand, albeit far less explosively than it did at the start.

"This initial *inflationary* period—from which the theory gets its name—took place in much less than the first trillionth of a second of the Big Bang. During this time—brief enough to make the blink of an eye seem like an eternity—the universe grew from a speck smaller than an atom to the size of a *galaxy*."

"From a speck to galaxy-sized?" repeated Osborne, as if he hadn't heard right. "In less than a second?"

"*Far* less than a second."

"And scientists are convinced this is true?" said the colonel.

Kelly shook her head. "No. Not absolutely. But the theory does explain a number of observations unexplainable in any other way."

Osborne considered. "So you're saying that *if* this is true, and one could find a speck of matter primed for inflation, hitting it with a strong enough anti-gravity force might trigger the conditions that spawned our universe."

"Exactly," said Kelly. "At least in theory. The other capabilities Harry mentioned, while not certain, aren't nearly as speculative. For example, by controlling gravity, it's possible to punch wormholes in the fabric of spacetime, creating shortcuts to instantly travel impossible distances."

Salazar nodded excitedly. "And the ability to mold spacetime would also allow us to go faster than light when a wormhole wasn't handy," he added.

"I thought that FTL travel was impossible," said Osborne.

"It is impossible," replied Kelly. "But there's a catch. You can't travel *through* space faster than light. But space *itself* can expand much

faster than this. During the infinitesimal duration of cosmic inflation, for instance, space traveled many, many orders of magnitude faster."

Kelly paused to let this sink in. "So if you controlled spacetime," she continued, "you could accelerate space to ludicrous speeds, and have your spaceship move *with* it rather than *through* it."

Salazar smiled at his protégé. "You always did have a knack for explaining complex science," he said appreciatively. "But jumping ahead, you've touched on the space aspects of spacetime. But there are time aspects as well. Control of the fabric of the universe would also make time travel a theoretical possibility."

He stared intently at Kelly and Boyd and raised his eyebrows. "But this isn't just *theoretical* anymore, is it?" he said. "Not judging by what you two are wearing. Or your miraculous ability to get from a car in Pennsylvania to your home in Spokane—in what to me is only an hour or two. If I had to guess, I'd say you just came from the Roaring Twenties."

"Not quite," said Kelly. "But not a bad guess, either. Just give me few more minutes and I'll tell you all about it."

"Deal," said Salazar.

"Hold on," said the colonel with a troubled look on his face. "Let's back up for a moment. We thought the cube's destructive power was off the charts. But based on what you're saying, it's infinitely worse than our wildest guesses. If this thing can cause an explosion capable of creating an entire universe, wouldn't it destroy *ours* in the process?"

"Great question," said Kelly. "Thankfully, no. There's also a theory called *Eternal Inflation*. This theory suggests that offshoot universes are being produced all the time from within our own, undergoing inflation in the same way ours did. The prevailing wisdom is that if we did spark a new universe in this way, it wouldn't harm the old one. It would just escape through a white hole and do its inflationary thing."

She sighed. "But even so, Colonel, you make a good point. Perfect control of gravity would give one unparalleled power. You could crush entire armies into dust, or float them off the planet. You could produce a baby black hole in an enemy's backyard—although that

isn't something I'd recommend," she added, making a face.

"But this being said," added Boyd, "the *good* it could do would also be enormous. Which is what we'd hope to harness. Not just making interstellar travel possible, but unlimited free energy, as was mentioned. Effortless transportation of people and goods. New construction modalities in which heavy girders could be floated into place without heavy equipment. And so on."

The two time travelers remained silent for almost a minute, allowing Salazar and the colonel to ponder the possibilities, to imagine just how profoundly this technology could catapult civilization to undreamed-of heights.

Unlimited energy would mean unlimited wealth. Interstellar travel would allow humanity to expand into the galaxy, ensuring species immortality. And this was just for starters.

"One last point before I move on," said Kelly, breaking the silence. "In addition to revolutionizing transportation and the like, the control of gravity could actually save our universe from a horrible death. *Our entire universe*."

"Well, yeah," said Boyd with a grin. "Not as important as lifting girders. But why don't you go ahead and explain anyway."

Kelly laughed. "It's widely accepted today that we have no idea what our universe is made from," she said. "Five percent is made from the atoms you learned about in school. The other ninety-five percent is a combination of matter and energy we can't detect, but which makes its presence felt in profound ways."

"You're speaking of dark energy and dark matter, right?" said Osborne.

"That's right," said Kelly. "And when it comes to the evolution of our universe," she continued, "it turns out that dark matter is our friend. And dark energy is our enemy. Dark matter is much more prevalent than the matter we can see, and it packs a hefty gravitational pull. So much so that cosmologists are convinced that ordinary matter would never have coalesced together without it."

She paused. "Dark matter formed a web across the entire early universe, which served as a scaffold for the matter we can see.

Ordinary matter was gravitationally attracted to the nodes of this dark matter web and clumped together. This eventually led to the creation of the first stars, and ultimately to hundreds of billions of galaxies."

"So despite having an ominous name," said Osborne, "we owe our existence to this dark matter."

"That's right," said Kelly. "But from the start, while dark matter was drawing ordinary matter to it like metal filings to a magnet, the vacuum of space was producing dark *energy*. Which, again, is anti-gravity, a repulsive force, trying to push things apart. I won't get into the details, but the vacuum of space is a dark energy dynamo and breeding ground.

"In the early days, when the universe was smaller and filled with scattered matter, this force was relatively weak. For the first nine billion years of our universe, dark matter's attractive gravitation kicked dark energy's ass. Dark matter's *pull* easily overcame dark energy's *push*."

Kelly shook her head. "But this hasn't been true for the last five billion years. Repulsion is coming to dominate more and more. Dark energy now looks sure to win this ultimate game of tug-of-war, eventually pushing the universe farther and farther apart until it ceases to truly exist."

"What changed?" said Osborne. "If the gravity of dark matter was stronger than the anti-gravity of dark energy, why did this reverse?"

"Empty space, dark energy's home, continued to expand. And as dark matter continued to pull ordinary matter into galaxies, the voids between nodes, the holes in the spiderweb, so to speak, were widened. And the larger the uninterrupted void grew, the stronger the repulsive force of dark energy became."

Kelly paused to catch her breath. "About five billion years ago, the universe hit a tipping point, and repulsion began winning, accelerating the universe apart. And the more the energy of the void pushes the universe apart, the bigger the void gets, and the more unstoppable its energy becomes. Eventually, most cosmologists believe the universe will end in something called The Big Freeze. This is when all motion within the cosmos stops, and usable energy no longer

exists. So while the universe began with a bang, it will end with an ice-cold whimper."

The colonel nodded, his face grim. "Which brings us back to the cube," he said. "You're saying its technology could save us from this fate."

"It's at least *possible*," said Kelly. "If duplicated in high enough numbers, the cubes could potentially counterbalance the repulsive force of dark energy and stabilize the universe. They could bring it into a delicate equilibrium between the forces pushing it together, and the forces pulling it apart."

"I wonder if this is why the aliens built them in the first place," mused Salazar. "Maybe they've sent them to every planetary body in the cosmos, to eventually work in concert to resist the push of dark energy across the entire universe. Maybe all of the cubes are just biding their time, waiting for just the right moment to act, perhaps billions of years from now."

"It's as good a theory to explain the cubes as any," said Kelly. "But let me get back to where I was. Sorry for the detour, but I couldn't help myself."

"I can understand why," said the colonel. "I'll never look at the universe the same way again."

9

Shen Ning and the five soldiers under his command had been squeezed into reinforced straightjackets that an enhanced Houdini couldn't escape, and had been chained inside the cargo hold of the American military transport.

The US military had used overwhelming force to disrupt Shen's planned ambush, showing a healthy respect for the enhanced lethality that his commandos brought to the table, and this respect hadn't diminished after their capture. Given the Americans' excessive caution, escape would be impossible. Not only had Shen and his men been restrained from moving a millimeter, video cameras were watching their every breath.

Upon the slightest provocation—which Shen knew was impossible, anyway, given their extreme level of immobilization—the hold would be flooded with enough electricity to knock out an elephant. Enhanced soldiers could well have genetic modifications that would allow their bodies to detoxify a number of gases and poisons, but the impact of near-lethal doses of electricity could not be denied.

Shen went over what had happened for perhaps the tenth time, but was still at a loss to explain it. The evidence suggested that the Americans had known the precise details of the ambush before *he* did. Considering that he had planned the entire thing alone, this was a very neat trick.

None of it added up. How could it be that the Americans had wiped Kelly Connolly and Justin Boyd from the face of the planet? If this had happened within China, he wouldn't have questioned it. His own country was a brutal totalitarian regime, despite the sheep's clothing it wore internationally. But for the Americans to kill their own people in such a public and dramatic fashion was unheard of.

Shen jumped, startled by a voice inside his head, but his

straightjacket and restraints pushed back against him, keeping him firmly in place.

"*Commander Shen*," said the voice coming from deep within his inner ear, which he quickly recognized as belonging to his direct superior, Yang Delan. "*Please focus carefully on what I'm telling you. I'll repeat this message every eight minutes from here on out, just in case you're otherwise occupied*.

"*First, I need to tell you about a secret program, one that you were not read into. A program named Starlance. It's an advanced weapons system that until now has remained unused. But this status is about to change*."

Yang went on for several minutes, describing the weapon's capabilities in great detail. Shen wondered why he was being told about this. He wasn't surprised that his superiors would want him dead. In their eyes, he had failed, and he knew too much to be allowed to stay in enemy hands. He'd have done the same in their shoes. But describing the weapon that would carry out this death sentence seemed crueler than necessary, especially since he had served China so well.

Shen exhaled loudly in relief as it became clear that this was not his superior's purpose. The goal was not his execution, but his extraction. And he would need to play a crucial role.

Now this was an unexpected development that had his full and total support.

"*Based on the telemetry from your beacon,"* continued his superior, *"and common sense, we believe that you're being taken to the US military's new black-site interrogation facility in the Sonoran Desert."*

Shen nodded to himself. That had been his guess, as well. Based on reports he had seen, this was the most secure, high-tech interrogation facility in the US. Not only was it equipped with the latest interrogation drugs and medical equipment, sources indicated it possessed leading-edge tech designed to get inside the heads of its guests, busting them open emotionally and psychologically.

Each prison cell had cost millions, as these cells doubled as virtual reality simulators. With the addition of certain drugs, these cells could create simulations that seemed even more real than reality, immersing

prisoners in apocalyptic environments, surrounding them with unspeakable horrors, depicting the bombing of their hometowns, or even the torture of loved ones.

Who needed physical torture when you could immerse a prisoner in the very bowels of a virtual hell designed just for them?

"This destination works in our favor," continued Yang. *"The facility is in the middle of nowhere. It's small. Isolated. It consists of a runway, a large airplane hangar, and two modest structures. Which makes it all the more vulnerable.*

"We've already scrambled a Chengdu S-28 stealth fighter your way. We'll bring it in at exceptionally high altitude to minimize any possibility of detection. It will then release twelve drones that will jam all communications into and out of your location. The jet is a two-seater, so it will later serve as your escape vehicle."

Yang went on to describe the entire plan. *"The goal is for you to make a clean escape,"* he finished. *"But also to avoid an escalation of hostilities with America. I have every confidence that you are up to the task, and have the improvisational skills needed to achieve both of these goals."*

Yang then signed off, at least for eight minutes, when his message would be rebroadcast in its entirety.

Commander Shen Ning allowed himself a brief smile as he reviewed his objectives. Things were definitely looking up. Minutes ago he was looking at a lengthy, brutal interrogation. Or a quick death if his home country could find a way to make that happen.

But now he would play an integral role in the deployment of technology he hadn't known existed. The plan wasn't guaranteed to work, by any means. But if he played his cards right, he'd have more than a fighting chance.

And he couldn't possibly ask for anything more.

10

Kelly Connolly-Boyd rose from her glass kitchen table and stepped through the clutter to reach her refrigerator, which the Chinese had actually closed after they had finished rifling through it. “Anyone up for a bottle of cold water?”

All three of her companions answered yes. When she finished passing out the bottles, she sat back down and picked up her narrative where she had left off, before she had taken a detour to explain the history of the universe. “So Otto had managed to unlock the Nazi-controlled cube,” she began again, “and learn what it could do.”

She went on to describe how her grandfather had gone on to steal the cube from under the Nazis’ noses, and had taken it to Spokane. How he had decided it was too powerful to give to any group of people, so had built a cabin around it in the woods and left it in its immovable, inactive state, refusing to touch it again.

And, finally, how he had changed his name to Jim Connolly, and written a journal, ensuring that his descendants would know the cube’s history and where it could be found. And within the pages of his journal, he had also pleaded with them to keep the cube out of the hands of the government or military until they were sure humanity was ready to handle it.

“He also passed his dark energy generator on to future generations, didn’t he?” guessed Salazar.

“He did,” said Kelly. “To be used as an ax. So his descendants could break the glass in case of an emergency.”

Salazar nodded. “And that emergency came about when the major suggested we try our prototype dark energy generator on the cube.”

“Right again. The cube was already in the hands of a government, contrary to my grandfather’s wishes. But at least it was unusable. And that was about to change.”

“So you stole it from our facility and took it off the grid.”

Kelly sighed. “Not nearly as far off the grid as I had thought,” she replied. “And I am so sorry, Harry. I panicked. It all happened so fast.

And you know how much I mistrusted the military at the time."

"Does that mean you don't now?" asked Salazar.

"I'm coming around. I still mistrust most of it, but not Justin. And not Colonel Osborne."

"Which is why they're here now," said Salazar. "And why I'm here. Because you've decided you can trust me, also."

"Yes. Although there's still a lot more to the story," said Kelly, who then asked Boyd to take over the narrative.

The major went on to explain that the Chinese had invented a dark energy detector, which had allowed them to locate inactive cubes. And they had found *two* of them on Earth. The one at Uru and another—whose location only the Chinese knew.

"Not only did the Chinese find our cube," said Boyd, "but they were able to plant undetectable bugs in the Uru facility. And they witnessed Kelly removing it from the premises."

He went on to explain how Chinese operatives had set up an ambush for them in Pennsylvania, which had been sprung just after they had spoken with Salazar in the car. How they were captured by a man named Shen Ning and brought to a Chinese island in the South China Sea. And how Shen had threatened to nuke the island back to the Stone Age if they didn't give up the cube.

"Did you give it up?" said Salazar in alarm.

"No. Luckily, Kelly discovered that it had a telepathic AI on board. Which began, ah . . . *talking* to her."

Salazar rolled his eyes. "Are you sure you aren't just making this up as you go along?"

Boyd laughed. "I can see how you might think that," he said.

"This is one of the first things that actually makes sense," said Osborne. "It's a closely guarded secret, but as of just three months ago, EHO has telepathic capabilities of our own. I'm sure you're familiar with tech that can read thought signatures, correct?"

Salazar nodded. "It's been around for decades. But I thought people were limited to using their thoughts to control cursors, prosthetic limbs, and video games—and that was about the extent of it."

“Not anymore,” said Osborne. “EHO scientists have perfected it. An operative can have tiny electronic chips implanted in their brains. These can collect, transmit, and interpret what we’re calling *thought* data, allowing the operative to have flawless telepathic communications—with their own AIs and with other operatives.”

“Okay then,” said Salazar sheepishly. “I guess it makes sense that the cube would be telepathic, after all. If lowly humanity can manage it, I’m sure it’s child’s play for the aliens.”

He paused and stared at Kelly. “So what happened after you discovered this AI?”

“My first thought was that maybe it could access higher dimensions and teleport us out of there.”

“Could it?” asked Salazar.

“Yes and no. It can facilitate teleportation, which is extraordinary. But it can only teleport matter between two different cubes existing in the same time period. And both cubes need to be in their active states. Unfortunately, the only other cube on the planet wasn’t active. It also told me it could teleport us to cubes positioned in interstellar space, but that we’d die from cold and lack of air.”

“Nothing like jumping from a nuclear holocaust into deep space,” said Boyd wryly.

“Yeah, definitely not something we were prepared to do at the time,” said Kelly. “But at some point soon we’ll have to don spacesuits and see if the offer still stands. It might not. The alien AI, which I call Eeny, can be very fickle.”

“Eeny?” said Salazar. “Is that from Eeny, meeny, miny, moe?”

“Really, Harry?” said Kelly in amusement. “You think I’d name it after Eeny, meeny, miny, moe?”

“That’s the only Eeny I’ve ever heard of.”

“It’s a shortened version of *Enigma*.”

Salazar winced. “Right,” he said. “Of course. That does make more sense.”

He paused. “But getting back to your predicament, you learned that teleportation wasn’t going to save you. So that must be when you turned to time travel.”

“Right,” said Kelly. “And ended up in 1943. For almost six months.”

“Why 1943?” asked Salazar. “Why not just escape to the previous day?”

“Because the time travel rules the AI is programmed with are extremely annoying,” she replied. “First, a cube can only open a time portal between an earlier and later version of itself. Both versions have to be active on either end. At least this rule is probably dictated by the fundamental laws of physics. I think the others are restrictions that aren’t hard-and-fast rules, just ones that it *chooses* to enforce.

“For instance, it won’t let anyone travel to a time in which another version of them is still alive—even as a baby. It also won’t allow one version of someone in the distant past to communicate with, or influence, another version of themselves in the future. And it won’t allow one to travel to a point in the future beyond which any version of them has ever been, in at least one timeline.”

“I must be missing something, then,” said Salazar after a moment of thought. “If it won’t allow two versions of someone to exist at the same time, how are you and the major here now? The versions of you I spoke with a few hours ago must still be in Pennsylvania.”

A pained expression came over Osborne’s face. “Yeah, you’d think that,” he said guiltily. “But they managed to get a message to me from the past. And I kind of . . . cleared the playing field for them to return.”

“Cleared the playing field? Does that mean what I think it does?”

Boyd sighed. “It was a horrible thing to ask him to do. But the bottom line is that we felt we had no choice. And in a way, he didn’t really kill us, because here we are. We have the exact same memories as the Justin and Kelly who are gone, with six months added. But if we had done nothing, thousands would have died on a Chinese island. And China would not only possess both cubes, but know how to activate them.”

Salazar digested this for several seconds. “If you all thought this was the right thing to do, it probably was. A horrific choice to have to make. But if I’m understanding things correctly, you’re at least

implying that in the current timeline, the Chinese don't know how to activate their cube."

"Thankfully, they do not," said Boyd. "But it goes without saying that we need to relieve them of their cube before they figure it out."

"But we haven't perfected a dark energy detector," noted Salazar. "So how will we locate it?"

"Good question," said Boyd. "With the foreknowledge we provided the colonel, he was able to capture a number of Chinese operatives in the woods of Pennsylvania. Including Shen Ning, the Chinese commander we told you about. We had fairly extensive . . . dealings with him in the future. He's as competent as he is ruthless. But we're sure he knows the location of this other cube."

"Perfect," said Salazar.

"Maybe," said Boyd. "But he'll be prepped not to spill secrets easily, resistant to truth serums and other means. So prying this information loose will be . . . challenging. I plan to interrogate him myself. Given what I learned of him in the future, I think I can get him off balance. Get him to slip up. But maybe not."

There was silence around the kitchen, as everyone was left alone with their thoughts.

Finally, Salazar gestured to the cube, still sitting innocently on the glass table in front of Kelly. "That's the Enigma Cube, isn't it?" he said. "In one of its active forms."

"It is," said Kelly.

He stared at it in silence for an extended period, looking eager to hold it, but resisting the urge. "And is the alien AI still on board?"

She nodded.

"Are you and . . . *it* . . . still on, ah . . . *speaking* terms?"

"We are."

"That's outstanding!" said Salazar. "It's bound to know the science behind the cube. Imagine the things we can learn from it."

Kelly frowned. "Surprisingly little, as it turns out. First, as I said, it's fickle. It won't tell us where the Chinese cube is located, for example. Who knows why. Maybe it has a sick sense of humor and finds it entertaining to watch us scramble to figure it out.

“But when it comes to not disclosing advanced science,” she continued, “I understand its rationale. If I were to be completely honest, I even agree with it. Remember how teachers in grade-school were always saying that if we didn’t do the work, if we cheated, we were only cheating *ourselves*? Well that’s how Eeny thinks. It insists that humanity learn the science on its own, and guards the answer key as if it were the Holy Grail.”

“Which it is,” noted Boyd.

“Which it is,” agreed Kelly. “But this is good for us. Our teachers were right, and so is the alien AI. Which is why we need to form a new group of scientists. To study the cube while it’s in the process of impacting spacetime. To figure out how it does what it does for ourselves.”

Salazar raised his eyebrows. “A new group?” he said. “Why not Uru?”

“We need to go rogue,” said Osborne. “At least for now. Kelly’s grandfather was right. We can’t put something this powerful into the hands of the government. Humanity isn’t ready. Not yet. But we plan to bring in select Uru personnel to join the new group. And you’re at the top of that list. Will you join us?”

“Before you decide,” said Kelly, “let me take our cube out for a spin. I’ll show you its various modalities, keeping it lightweight so it doesn’t sink through the floor.”

She nodded at a few of the piles of wreckage surrounding them. “Then maybe we’ll use it to clean up some of this mess,” she added. “Gravity control style. We can lift some of the debris into the air, and we can crush some of it into dust. At least for starters. How does that sound?”

The smile that came over Salazar’s face could have lit up a stadium. “That sounds great,” he said. “But I don’t need to wait for a demonstration to know that I’m in,” he added. “Not even the repulsive force that started cosmic inflation could keep me away.”

“Wow,” said Boyd with a grin. “It’s great to have you on board, Harry. But that just might be the geekiest sentence I’ve ever heard in my life.”

11

Shen Ning felt the bounce of the plane's wheels as the military transport touched down. Minister Yang had confirmed thirty minutes earlier that he had enough flight-path data from Shen's beacon to confirm that they were being transported to where Yang had guessed —a black-site interrogation facility in the center of the Sonoran Desert.

The plane rolled to a halt, and the vast cargo-bay hatch was slowly opened. Countless American soldiers could be seen lining the runway and beyond, many of them elite commandos. They were well scattered, and each was pointing a weapon in the direction of the prisoners, who were still locked firmly inside the plane.

The man in charge of the American operation, Colonel Ronald Vaughn, approached the cargo hold on foot with a grim expression. Shen was a distance away from the others, and the colonel approached him and freed him from the hull. He proceeded to undo Shen's reinforced straightjacket, having realized from the start that the commander had no superhuman enhancements, and then quickly backed off.

The American colonel tossed Shen a set of keys. "Free your comrades from the plane," he ordered, retreating back to the runway. "But leave their straightjackets in place. Remember, the electric grid is still active, and you're still being monitored."

Shen proceeded to free the commandos from their chains. Once he was finished, Vaughn tossed him a pair of handcuffs and ordered him to slip them around his wrists, which he did without complaint.

"Now exit the plane," shouted Vaughn from the runway. "Slowly and carefully."

Shen almost laughed. Given that the five commandos were still straightjacketed, slowly and carefully was all they could manage anyway.

Shen led his comrades down the ramp and onto the runway, and then stopped to take in his surroundings. He counted approximately thirty men on foot at various distances from them. About twenty yards beyond this large gathering of foot soldiers, four parked jeeps surrounded the plane, each sporting two massive machine guns mounted on heavy steel supports. All eight of these guns were manned by soldiers who looked eager for target practice. These men had seen too many Marvel movies to take anything for granted when it came to enhanced supersoldiers.

As expected, the facility was so isolated it could have been an outpost on the moon. It consisted of a long concrete runway, an aircraft hangar, and two large buildings—a steel barracks and single-story main facility, spread out over a wide area.

Beyond this man-made oasis, for as far as the eye could see, was nothing but a barren ocean of clay and sand. Shen knew the scorched, eerie desolation extended for hundreds of miles in all directions without any sign of civilization, making escape on foot a certain death sentence.

"We see you on satellite, Commander," said Yang inside his ear. *"The drones have been deployed. They'll begin jamming all communications to and from this base on my mark."*

There was a brief pause. "*Mark*."

"Let's go!" said Colonel Vaughn, nodding in the direction of the main facility.

Shen and his contingent of commandos began to walk slowly away from the plane, while the thirty or so armed soldiers maintained a constant distance around them, always careful to keep a shooting lane clear for the machine-gun mounted jeeps.

"Starlance has its eye glued on you and your men," continued Yang. *"Simply tilt your head toward the sky when you're ready to proceed."*

The group was moving steadily toward the main structure when Shen issued a few words in Mandarin, ordering his comrades to halt. He then proceeded to approach Vaughn, his cuffed hands hanging down in front of him. "Colonel," he said in perfect English, "may I have a word with you?"

“Stop right there!” ordered Vaughn. “Get back with the others! We’ll have plenty of time to chat once you’re inside your cell.”

Shen stopped in his tracks, eight feet away from the colonel. “That’s fine,” he said loudly. “My message isn’t private anyway. I just wanted to ask you and your people to watch my five comrades behind me very carefully.”

“Don’t worry,” said Vaughn, “we don’t plan to even blink until they’re in their cells.”

“Good,” said Shen, who then proceeded to tilt his head and gaze upward.

Five blazing red beams blinked on in the sky, each the circumference of a silver dollar, thrusting down from on high. At the same instant, all five straightjacketed men dropped to the pavement simultaneously, smoke streaming from perfectly formed holes blasted through the tops of their skulls, which flash-boiled their brains into oblivion.

The five beams disappeared in the blink of an eye, but a moment later reappeared, this time trained on the torso’s of the fallen men, where they remained for three seconds. Each body burst into flame after just the first second, but the beams remained for two seconds longer to ensure that the charred bodies melted away, almost as if they had been hit by a *Star Trek* phaser set to kill.

The air and clouds roiled above from this violation, as if the sun itself had extended fingers down to strike at the Earth. It was like something out of *War of the Worlds*, except that the obliterating red beams had not come from a giant tripod, but somewhere even more troubling.

Starlance had lived up to its billing—and then some. For anyone out in the open, it was unstoppable. Whoever could be seen by a spy satellite could be hit and killed instantly. Any time, and any place. There was no avoiding it, and, worst of all, no warning. One second you could be minding your own business, and the next melted down into slag, like an ant fried by an expertly wielded magnifying glass.

The Chinese commander felt awe at the jaw-dropping spectacle, but not a tinge of remorse over the terrible fate of his men.

Shen glared at the colonel. “Do what I say!” he shouted. “Or you and your men will be next! Order them to drop their weapons.”

Vaughn hesitated.

“Do it!” screamed the Chinese commander. “Don’t make me provide another demonstration. You have three seconds. Two. One—”

“Everyone drop their weapons!” shouted Vaughn.

“Smart move, Colonel,” said Shen. “Tell them to get closer to me so I don’t have to shout. All of them, including your machine-gunners on the jeeps. I want them facing me, but at least ten feet away.”

Minutes later these orders had been carried out, and Shen now faced a wall of unarmed men, glaring at him with ferocious intensity.

“What you just witnessed,” began Shen loudly when his audience was in place, “is a satellite-based laser weapon. The lasers travel at the speed of light. Which means that their journey from the satellite to the ground takes about a thousandth of a second. So even if you were dodging at the speed of a cheetah, one could hit a fly on your head with pinpoint accuracy.”

Shen paused for effect.

“Now if you’re inside a building,” he continued, “or underground —so the satellite can’t see you—you’re relatively safe. But that isn’t the case right now, is it? So if any of you take a single step in the direction of a building, it will be your last.”

Vaughn stared into the Chinese commander’s eyes and shook his head in disgust. “You need to stand down,” he said in contempt. “Or you’ll be starting the mother of all international incidents. Because if you kill one of us, you’ll have to kill us all. And then you’ll have to deal with the wrath of every country on Earth. The repercussions will be staggering. Is that what China wants? Do you think any country will tolerate a weapon like this literally hanging over their heads?”

Shen put on a cocky, amused expression, well aware that he would need to bluff from here on out. Starlance needed to repower. The energy required to send a coherent, searing-hot laser beam down from low-Earth orbit was astronomical. The system was now fully spent, unable to fire again for almost an hour.

“Come now, Colonel,” he said calmly. “I don’t want anyone killed.

Or even hurt. But that is entirely up to you."

He paused. "And let's discuss this international incident that you think I'm provoking. Where am I provoking it? Here? At a black-site detention and interrogation facility that isn't supposed to exist? One filled with equipment that violates any number of treaties. I'm afraid that to the international community, Colonel, *I'm* the party being wronged."

"Not as wronged as you're *going* to be!" barked Vaughn.

Shen smiled. "I'll ignore your hollow threat and continue. Just for the record, this laser weapon isn't controlled by my country. It was built by a friend of mine. A major industrialist in Europe. One who has nothing to do with China."

"Do you take me for an idiot?" said Vaughn.

"You find that implausible?" said Shen innocently. "Why? Because only a superpower could pull this off? Not true any longer. For the right price, any number of private companies can now launch payloads into space."

He shrugged. "But even if you *could* prove that China is behind it, the repercussions will be diplomatic and economic only. There might be hell to pay behind the scenes, but the peace will be kept. The price is too high for this to be otherwise. And I'm sure the weapon won't be used again after today."

Vaughn snorted. "I'm sure, too. Because we're going to find it and destroy it."

"Not as easy as you think. Stealth tech can make a satellite nearly invisible. You'd have better luck finding a needle in a haystack the size of Mt. Everest. And even if you find it, its defenses operate at the speed of light."

"Every country in the world will unite against it."

Shen laughed. "Maybe," he said. "But if your government discloses what happened here, you'll be the bad guy. Let's review. I was contacted by two of your people, Major Justin Boyd and Dr. Kelly Connolly. They asked to meet with me in the woods. Since Major Boyd is part of your EHO program—which isn't public knowledge, by the way—he agreed to let me bring as many men and weapons as I

needed to feel safe."

"You're full of shit."

"Maybe, but you don't have evidence to the contrary. And you'll like this part even better. Because when we went to meet with them, the American military blew them up. Murdered them. Your own people. Along with dozens of innocents I hired to provide security. We have satellite footage of the entire thing. Explosives have signatures that experts can ferret out. Fingerprints that will show that the explosives came from American stockpiles."

The colonel glared at him but didn't respond.

"So we came for an innocent meeting with a lethal American supersoldier, of a type you don't even acknowledge. And what happened then? You blew him up, and launched an unprovoked attack against us. Then you brought the survivors to a black site torture facility."

Shen shook his head. "And you're telling me you'll have the nerve to cry international foul," he said. "Why, because a European friend of mine accidentally fired a laser at some Chinese nationals?" A smug smile came over his face. "That's right," he added. "The only fatalities in this little drama have all occurred on *our* side."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, except for the two Americans that *your* people killed."

"What do you want?" snapped Vaughn.

"Just my freedom," said the Chinese commander. "I did nothing wrong, yet I'm being illegally detained."

Shen paused. "As a show of good faith," he added with self-satisfied smirk, "I'll agree not to file any complaints with the international community about how you've mistreated us."

The colonel ignored this attempt to get a further rise out of him. "That's all you want?" he said suspiciously. "Just to be freed?"

"That's all. I'll require you and your men to remain inside your hangar for three hours. For your own safety, just in case my friend with the laser accidentally shoots it off again. And you should know, by the way, that your communications are being blocked, in case you think you can blow the whistle from inside."

The colonel's scowl intensified.

"You have no choice, Colonel Vaughn. You can retreat to your hangar and let me leave a free man. Or you can refuse, in which case you get to watch every last one of your people burst into flames—with you last. And then I waltz away a free man anyway."

The colonel nodded. "Well played, Commander Shen. You win. But as smug as you pretend to be, your president must be *furious* that he had to show us his hole card. I don't know why you've been deemed a high-value prisoner. But I'm sure that the intel we gain by learning of this weapon's existence more than outweighs the intel we lose by letting you walk."

"Good," said Shen. "Then it's a win-win." He extended his cuffed hands into the air in front of him.

Vaughn didn't reply. Instead, he approached with a key, removed the cuffs, and ordered his men to follow him into the hangar.

Shen waited calmly for them to complete their retreat.

"*Well done, Commander*," said the giddy voice of Yang Delan in his ear when the American forces were safely inside the hangar. "*I only wish I could hear what was being said. Judging by what I could see, you had them eating out of your hand. Now get to the edge of the runway, because your ride will be landing in just a few minutes."*

"Roger that," said Shen, despite knowing that Yang couldn't hear him. He was very much looking forward to getting back to China.

And to getting to the bottom of how his op had gone so horribly wrong.

PART 3

Cowards die many times before their death. The valiant never taste of death but once.”

—Shakespeare (Julius Caesar, Act II, Scene II)

12

The City of Rome, Ancient Times

Jim Connolly returned to consciousness feeling utterly horrible, worse than he could ever remember, but also shocked to even be alive.

His eyes still shut, he noted in relief that his heart was beating at a slow, steady rhythm, despite a searing pain in his shoulder that was impossible to ignore.

A memory appeared suddenly in his mind's eye, featuring a Roman soldier in the Praetorian Guard spinning around from where he had been thrown into a wall, removing a hidden dagger, and lunging at Connolly, all in one smooth motion, slicing a half-inch-deep groove across his shoulder.

He shuddered as he remembered.

The awakened time traveler who had once been named Otto Richter quickly took stock of his situation. Given that he was still alive, his heart must have settled down and found a steady rhythm soon after he had passed out. Twice before during the past few months his heart had raced and he had passed out, thankfully not while driving a car or while in any other compromising position.

The difference was that he had regained consciousness almost immediately after these past occurrences. He had a feeling that hadn't been the case *this* time.

And there was one other tiny little difference. During his previous two episodes, elite Roman soldiers hadn't been rushing to his location to kill him.

Once again, Connolly could feel heavy iron shackles around his wrists, but this time they simply tied his hands together rather than

chaining him to a heavy object.

Progress, I suppose, said a part of his mind that couldn't help but find the humor in any situation, untimely or inappropriate as it might be.

Connolly opened his eyes and was stunned to find Senator Marcus Dorso seated at the same pink marble table he had been at the first time the time traveler had come to. Connolly would have thought he'd somehow gone through a time-loop and was back where he began, if not for the absence of the parchment scroll the senator had been reading the first time around, and the presence of a pair of shackles around the man's wrists that matched Connolly's own.

The two legionnaires he and Dorso had downed were now nowhere to be found. Instead, a tunic-clad civilian was lying against the opposite maroon plaster wall, either unconscious or dead, his hands also shackled. The man presented a horrific sight, bruised and bloodied in a way that screamed torture. Other than the presence of the tortured man, he and the senator appeared to be alone in the senator's villa.

Dorso's face was creased with both anxiety and anguish, but he brightened somewhat upon seeing that Connolly had awakened.

"Welcome back," he said, walking to where the German-turned-American was lying on the colorful mosaic-tile floor and extending both shackled hands to help him up.

"Thanks," said the time traveler, but he waved Dorso away, slowly getting to his knees on his own power and gingerly lifting himself off the floor.

Moments later, he and the senator were facing each other once again across the pink marble table, in the same seats they had taken previously.

"I cleaned and sutured your shoulder," said Dorso, and Connolly glanced over at it for the first time, noting the large, uneven stitches that the senator had driven through his skin, worsening the pain even further, but turning gushing blood into a slow seepage that would soon solidify. He didn't want to even think about his odds of infection given the lack of modern antiseptic technique, but he could hardly

complain.

"Thank you," he said sincerely.

Dorso lifted his shackled hands. "Quite a challenge with these on," he said, "but at least the blood loss won't kill you."

"What happened after I passed out?" he said, staring into the senator's eyes.

"Additional soldiers arrived almost immediately."

The time traveler gestured to the man on the ground, who was covered by so much bright-red blood that he looked as though he had been skinned alive. "Who is *he*?"

"Who *was* he," corrected Dorso, his face once again displaying the anguish he was feeling. "He didn't survive the torture," he added as a tear rolled down his face. "He was a good friend."

"I'm so sorry," whispered Connolly.

Dorso nodded, wiping away the tear and pausing to get his emotions under control. "Sejanus tortured him to get to *me*," he continued in disgust, but his resolve had clearly returned. "And to make sure they had rounded up everyone who was involved. He had his men bring the body here to rattle me."

"Why aren't *we* dead?" asked Connolly. "Or at least in prison?"

"As to why we aren't dead, this is a very temporary state. There are at least six legionnaires guarding the door. We'll likely be tortured and killed not long after Sejanus arrives in an hour or two."

The senator paused. "As to your prison question," he said, "you again display a curious ignorance of how things operate here." He raised his eyebrows. "And you still haven't told me where you're from. Despite the return of your memory."

"You're right," replied Connolly. "So here goes. I'm from a land that almost no one from this part of the world is even aware of. It's part of an extremely large . . . *island*. One that we call *America*."

Dorso frowned. "I find that hard to believe," he said. "For the same reason I found it hard to believe your initial story. You suggest there is a place so distant that the empire isn't even aware of its existence. And yet everyone there speaks perfect Latin."

Connolly smiled. "Fewer of us than you might think, actually."

“So you’re sticking to this ridiculous story?”

“I’ll admit to telling some untruths, but this isn’t one of them. I really do come from a place called America.”

The senator considered pursuing this further, but chose to let it go. “Getting back to your expectation that we’d be in prison,” he said, changing gears. “Can I assume from this that you have a lot of prisons in . . . America?”

“I’d have to say that we have an . . . *ample* supply, yes,” replied Connolly. “I take it that isn’t the case here,” he added, surprised that this would be true.

“That’s right,” confirmed Dorso, shaking his head, almost imperceptibly, as if he still couldn’t believe the total ignorance of the man sitting across from him. “We have a small number. And these serve merely as holding cells for those awaiting execution. A few additional cells are used to hold gladiators too dangerous not to cage.”

“You don’t lock up people who break the law?” asked Connolly, continuing to be furious with himself at being so ill-informed. “You must have your fair share of lawbreakers here.”

Dorso smiled, and for just a brief instant his magnetism returned full force. “I’ve never heard the term *fair share* before,” he replied, “but I understand your meaning. And yes, in a city of just over a million, most of them poor, crime is rampant. But what would be the point of locking people up?”

“To keep them from committing additional crimes. To make sure they don’t hurt anyone else. And as a punishment, to deny them their freedom for long periods of time.”

Dorso shook his head in disbelief. “You’re kidding, right? A third of all people in Rome are slaves. If you want to deny a thief’s freedom, having them join these ranks would be the way to do it.”

Connolly inhaled sharply. *A third of the population?* That was *insane*. How could any society possibly make that work?

“So you enslave all criminals?” he asked incredulously.

“Not at all. Very few. Crimes committed by the poor, who comprise almost all of our free population, are met with swift, and often lethal, justice. Some criminals volunteer for the gladiator games

—or are forced to participate. For lesser infractions, our legal system is based on the principle of an *eye for an eye*."

Dorso paused to let Connolly digest what he had said. "The wealthy, like me," he continued, "are typically afforded house arrest while they await a trial—or an execution."

"I see," said Connolly. "But you said earlier that you prefer not to own any slaves."

"That's right. And I don't."

"If slaves make a third of the entire population, you must be the only senator in Rome not to have any."

"This is also true."

"Why is that?"

Dorso frowned. "Because I've devoted many years of my life to fighting against this horrific practice. Well, fighting in a political sense. Very subtly, and very much behind the scenes. The freeing of all slaves throughout the empire has been my primary goal. But I also intend to find ways to fight poverty, improve the treatment of women and children, and abolish the gladiator games and other barbarities."

"That might have been your plan originally, but you were forced to change it, weren't you? You came to realize you had no chance of success in the shadows, am I right? That political maneuvering alone, despite your enormous natural charisma, wouldn't get it done. That changing the fight from political to *actual* was the only way."

Dorso nodded dejectedly.

"Which is why you're presently awaiting Sejanus and execution."

"Sejanus doesn't need an actual reason to kill—even senators. But in this case I can't argue that he doesn't have one." He held Connolly's gaze for several long seconds. "You may not *know* anything, but you're nobody's fool, either."

"Not the highest compliment I've ever received," said Connolly wryly. "But given my inexcusable ignorance, better than I deserve. In any event, if there is a way to help you to escape, I intend to find it. Remember how important I think you are."

He paused in thought. "I seem to remember that there's a wall around the city," he said. "Or am I remembering wrong?"

“There is. The Servian Wall, built about four hundred years ago. It encircles all seven hills. But Rome’s strength and power has increased so much since then that the city is no longer in danger from barbarian hordes, and the wall has been abandoned. So it’s a non-issue. Even so—even if I somehow escaped—I’d still be in shackles. And Sejanus and scores of his men would be hot on my tail.”

“The cube changes everything,” said Connolly. “If I’m able to give you a head start, I want you to go to where you threw it into the river. Call the cube with your mind, and order it to remove your shackles.”

“It can do that?”

“It can. If soldiers are bearing down on you, launch yourself into the river. Have the cube speed you underwater until you’re well out of sight. Hold your breath until then. It won’t take long. The cube can move you faster than you can possibly know. When Sejanus and his men never see you come up for air, they’ll assume you’re dead and stop hunting for you.”

He paused. “Then learn what the cube wants from you.”

“And you really think you can spring me and give me a head start?”

“I’ll find a way. There’s no other choice.”

Dorso shook his head. “I think you might be delusional,” he said. Then, with a smile, he added, “On the other hand, I thought you were crazy when you said we could escape before. And if not for your heart issue, we would have. So I’ll follow your lead.”

“Good. Where is your stable?”

“I don’t have one. Few do.”

“So where do you keep your horse?”

“Tied in a pasture about two hundred paces to the east.”

Connolly frowned. “The river is to the west. Will Sejanus have a horse?”

“Yes. But likely only him. There are any number at Castra Praetoria, his military base just northeast of Quirinal Hill. They’re used widely for conquest and other military campaigns throughout the empire. But within Rome, only the wealthiest own a horse.”

“Like you?”

Dorso nodded. “But horses are absent mostly because they aren’t necessary. It isn’t a hardship to walk. You can get from any hill to any other hill in one or two hours, at a fairly leisurely pace.”

“Still, a horse will get you there all the faster.”

“No argument there,” said Dorso.

“Where do you think Sejanus will tie his?”

“Probably to the west. In the thickest grouping of olive trees, to maximize shade. He treats people like dirt, but pampers his horse.”

“Okay, good. I’ll figure out some way to get you free if it’s the last thing I ever do. Once you are, get to the river like we discussed. But let them catch up, so they see you jump in. By faking your death, no one will ever come after you again. You’ll be free and clear to figure out the next stage of your life.”

Connolly sighed. “Just stay alert, and be prepared for any opening.”

“I will.”

“Good. In the meanwhile, let’s continue our discussion. So you’ve been engaged in treasonous activities. Like what?”

Dorso considered. “I guess I can tell you, in generalities. As long as I stick to what I’m sure Sejanus already knows. I’ve come to trust you, but not enough to implicate any others.”

“I would never ask you to.”

“My plan was to remove the emperor and replace him with someone of our choosing.”

“I see,” said Connolly, pausing to consider this further. “So, basically, following in the footsteps of the senators who ah . . . *removed* Julius Caesar?”

Dorso stared at the time traveler in disbelief. “You know almost nothing. Yet you know about *this*?”

“It was such a major event, news of it made its way far and wide. All the way to my country. A man named Shakespeare even wrote a play about it.”

“Interesting,” said Dorso slowly. “But, yes,” he added, returning to the subject at hand, “we thought this was the right time to stage a coup. Sejanus thinks and acts as if *he’s* the emperor. And for all

practical purposes, given that the emperor has named him regent, he is. But the reality is that Tiberius still holds this position, regardless of his self-imposed exile from Rome. And regardless of how much power he's abdicated to Sejanus."

"If Tiberius is emperor, why would he leave Rome?"

"So you know of Julius Caesar, but nothing about our *current* emperor?"

Connolly winced. "Another hole in my . . . education. I've heard the name Tiberius before." The hint of a smile crossed his face. "But mostly as the middle name of a man named James Kirk," he added, unable to help himself.

"What?"

"Never mind. Tell me about this Tiberius."

The senator sighed. "Why not?" he said in resignation. "What better way to spend the last hours of my life than telling a stranger what every adult in the known world is well aware of."

"Thank you," said Connolly, ignoring the sarcasm. "Before you begin, though, was your plan to get rid of the actual emperor, Tiberius. Or the acting emperor, Sejanus?"

"Both. It's hard to say who's worse between the two. The plan was to remove Tiberius, since he's the easier target right now. Then install a new emperor, one with the power to take down Sejanus." He shook his head. "And we considered taking down Sejanus the most difficult part of the plan."

"Even with a newly installed emperor in place? One who isn't ceding any of his power?"

"That's right. Sejanus has powerful friends, and he's bastardized the Praetorian Guard. Instead of using it for its intended purpose—service to the emperor and empire—he's turned it into an instrument that serves no one but himself."

Connolly leaned forward. "Given these obstacles, you must have quite a plan," he said, eager to hear all about it. He may not have had an innate love of history, but he loved chess, and this plan was certain to have subtleties and complexities enough to impress the most accomplished grandmaster.

If not for the searing pain in his shoulder, a heart that was about to give out, the bloody body of a man who had been tortured to death nearby, and an executioner on his way to kill him and Dorso, Jim Connolly would have been enjoying himself immensely.

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“I’m afraid I can’t give you the details of how we planned to overthrow Tiberius,” said Dorso, lifting his shackled hands from his lap and resting them on the surface of the pink marble table.

“I’m not entirely surprised,” said Connolly, not trying to hide his disappointment. “So I guess I’ll settle for a history lesson on Tiberius and Sejanus.”

“How basic do you want me to be?” asked Dorso.

“Extremely.”

“Very well,” said the senator. He blew out a long breath as he considered what to leave in and what to leave out. “Tiberius Caesar was born Tiberius Nero,” he began. “But when little Tiberius was four, his mother divorced his father and married Augustus Caesar.”

“Very upwardly mobile of her,” mused Connolly.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Sorry,” said Connolly. “I’ll only interrupt with questions from now on. Please go on.”

“In time,” continued Dorso, “after Augustus’s two grandsons were killed—both of whom he had been eyeing as possible successors—he adopted Tiberius. This gave Tiberius the Caesar name, and he became the obvious choice to replace Augustus upon his passing.”

“How long ago did Tiberius become emperor?”

“About twenty years now. But he was already a fossil at the time, fifty-four years old. And after a distinguished military career, he had become a dour, bitter, horrid excuse for a human being.”

Dorso paused. “Not that this was entirely his fault. I’ll dispense with details of his life before he became emperor, but he was once a happy man, deeply in love with his wife. But Augustus changed that. He forced Tiberius to divorce his wife to marry Augustus’s daughter. The impact this had on Tiberius’s personality was profound. It’s hard to know what he would have been like had this not happened.”

Connolly nodded. There were so many inflection points in history, so many instances in which a single decision or event could forever change the course of human history in ways that were profound and long-lasting.

It was good that the cube's AI had the stringent rules for time travel that it did, because one could go mad trying to change history for the better, trying to predict the impact that a relatively modest change could make on the timeline.

Would the flap of a tiny butterfly wing somehow cause a massive ripple effect that was enormously out of proportion to the initial cause? Or would a seemingly massive change have little impact, as it got subsumed by the molasses-like inertia of the river of time?

In the case of Marcus Dorso, it was easy to see how his actions, taken or not taken, could cause wild fluctuations in future history. *He was attempting to assassinate a Roman emperor*. The implications of his success or failure, both, would be *huge*.

Despite Connolly's debilitating lack of historical knowledge, he was all but certain that Dorso had failed in his attempt. If he had succeeded in such a bold move, surely Connolly would at least remember hearing his name.

But maybe not. The name Brutus was well known for his role in taking down Julius Caesar. But while Connolly knew that Brutus had worked with fellow conspirators, he wasn't familiar with their names.

But even in failure, Dorso and his co-conspirators could have set in motion ideas and political movements that could have ultimately transformed the future in unpredictable ways. The Roman Empire was a colossus on the world stage, and would have a direct, monumental impact on world affairs for many centuries to come. Even after the empire ended, it would have a more indirect, but still massive influence on the course of civilization for thousands, if not tens of thousands, of years after that.

But while Dorso's potential to spawn tectonic shifts in the future was clear, just how this might come about could not be less so. And the same questions remained. Why had Trek chosen this senator? Why now? And how had it intended to steer him if Connolly had never

arrived and disrupted its plans?

"After Tiberius became emperor," continued Dorso, "he began to despise the Senate, and the Senate began to despise him. Early on, he pretended publicly that he didn't really want power. That he intended to treat senators as equals. But in private he took bold steps to seize power. And he treated senators more like slaves."

Dorso paused. "So after alienating the Senate, he found himself without a confidant. And that's where Sejanus came in. He was a cavalry officer Tiberius had known since he was a boy, and someone Tiberius had come to trust."

"Which is how Sejanus ultimately came to command the Praetorian Guard."

"That's right. And Tiberius used Sejanus to unleash a reign of terror on the city, ordering the murder of countless innocents. Over the years, Sejanus assumed more and more control, until he became as powerful—maybe more powerful—than Tiberius. As Sejanus rose to become emperor in all but name only, he began purging his own political enemies, launching widespread treason trials, and even executing the wives and children of some of the men he opposed."

Dorso waited a moment for this to sink in and then continued. "But Sejanus's biggest coup was yet to come. He managed to eliminate a potent rival, and crush the heart of the emperor, with the same blow.

"While in his sixties," continued the senator, "Tiberius began grooming his son, Drusus, to succeed him. So when Drusus died of '*mysterious*' causes, Tiberius was absolutely shattered. It pushed him over the edge. He was never the same. He retreated from Rome and abdicated his responsibilities as emperor."

"Just to be clear, you're saying that Drusus's death wasn't mysterious at all. That Sejanus was behind it."

"Yes."

"If this is so, and dealt such an emotional blow to Tiberius, how is Sejanus still standing?"

"Everyone knows Sejanus was behind it *except* the emperor. How is that possible? I don't know. Stupidity. Gullibility. Willful ignorance.

I suppose that Tiberius didn't want to let himself believe that his most trusted friend would do such a thing. But there is little doubt as to what happened. Sejanus seduced Drusus's wife, and the two of them managed to poison Drusus slowly, so his death would look natural."

"What was his motive for killing Tiberius's son?"

"Rivalry for the emperor's attention. Mutual hatred. But mostly Sejanus did it because *he* intends to succeed Tiberius himself. *Despite* not being part of his bloodline, or having been adopted. The fact that this move resulted in Tiberius leaving Rome in Sejanus's hands was just a happy accident for him. Tiberius went so far as to officially appoint Sejanus *regent*, giving him the formal authority to govern Rome in his absence. Since this time, the atrocities and persecutions long carried out by Sejanus, which had previously all had Tiberius's consent or encouragement, have only gotten worse."

"So where is Tiberius now?"

"On the island of Capri. Living in the grandest of twelve villas on top of a towering cliff overlooking the ocean. There, he has sunk to new lows of brutality and debauchery. Given the old lows, this is hard to imagine."

"New lows—like what?" said Connolly.

"His residence is set near a steep precipice that he delights in using to murder whomever he pleases—on a whim—including visitors, and servants who don't live up to his standards. A mathematician once gave him an answer he didn't like, and he had him beaten to death and decapitated.

"Those who displease him are tortured first, and then killed. He watches as they are thrown off the cliff toward the water two hundred cubits below, only to have their bodies mutilated at the bottom by soldiers.

"With respect to his debauchery," continued Dorso, "this also knows no bounds. The emperor sits all day among spectacular gardens and lavish marble rooms eating and drinking the finest food and wine, served to him by nude young girls. Explicit pornography is painted on every wall. Pornographic scenes that he brings to life every day.

"The older he gets, the more it takes to excite him, sexually, and

the more depraved he becomes. He has men who bring him beautiful children, culled from across the empire, whom he then defiles. If their parents put up a fight, his men are authorized to take the children by force.

"These children, and numerous other beautiful young men and women, are expected to engage in sex acts and orgies so debased they defy the imagination, while he watches. One of his favorite activities is swimming naked in his imperial pool while little boys, specially trained, follow underneath him and nibble at his genitals—as if they were minnows. He's been known to—"

"I think I have the picture," interrupted Connolly, looking as if he might vomit. He shook his head. "And I thought *Caligula* was Rome's most depraved emperor."

Dorso's eyes widened. "You know nothing of Tiberius or Sejanus, but you know of Gaius?" he said incredulously. "And even his nickname, Caligula? How is that possible?"

"He sticks out—like Julius. I have some knowledge of Julius Caesar, because he's your most famous emperor. And I have some knowledge of Caligula, because he's your most *infamous*."

Dorso tilted his head and blew out a long breath. "You're from the future, aren't you?"

"*What?*"

"I know how ridiculous that sounds," said the senator unhappily. "And yet, it has to be true."

"Of course it isn't. What does that even mean, *from the future*?"

"Spare me your denials," said Dorso irritably. "I've suspected as much for a while, but I didn't want to believe it. Believing it would be another sign that I've lost my grip on reality. And while something like this isn't possible, neither is the cube or the method of your arrival. And it's the only explanation that makes any sense."

Connolly winced. "Caligula hasn't served as emperor yet, has he?"

"Nor is he ever expected to. We've failed in our mission to replace Tiberius. But even if Sejanus fails in *his* quest to become emperor, Gaius—Caligula—*still* isn't slated to be Tiberius's successor."

"So how *does* Caligula fit in?"

“He’s the great nephew of Tiberius. But from what you just said, he’ll find a way to maneuver himself into power, and become an emperor even more depraved than his great-uncle. Which is hard to imagine.”

Connolly sighed. “Hard to imagine, yes,” he agreed, “but also true. Caligula will come to be known as the most cruel, sadistic, and tyrannical of all emperors. He’ll become infamous for relishing torture, executions, and debauchery at least as much as Tiberius. Ultimately, he’ll be referred to as *the mad emperor* for his questionable sanity.”

“So the current situation will go from bad to worse,” said Dorso, his face now white as a sheet. “Because of *my* failure in removing Tiberius.”

“There’s no way you can blame yourself,” said Connolly. “You’ve made every effort to set things right. But, yes, this is what is destined to happen.”

The senator closed his eyes for several long seconds and then reopened them. “This is truly terrible news,” he said miserably. “The worst imaginable.”

“I’m sorry to have to bear it.”

Dorso’s eyes narrowed. “I’m surprised that you did,” he said. “I expected you to continue denying the truth of your origin.”

“What would be the point?” said Connolly. “You’ve proven yourself far too bright, and I’ve proven myself far too *stupid* to pretend that you aren’t right. So where is this Gaius now?”

“Living with his great uncle on Capri. Word is that Tiberius has long delighted in forcing his great nephew to have sex with male prostitutes.”

“Your emperor is an absolute *nightmare*,” said Connolly. After having lived in Nazi Germany, no human barbarism or brutality could shock him, but Tiberius was truly an abomination.

Connolly gestured with his shackled hands to the man seated across from him. “But you, Senator Dorso, seem to be the *opposite* of Tiberius. The contrast between you and the emperor couldn’t be greater. Everything I know tells me that you’re an exceptionally

decent man. I'm sure whomever you had in mind to replace Tiberius would have served brilliantly. In fact, I find myself wishing that you had succeeded. Which may be why the cube came to you. To help make that happen."

"But you said that in the future you come from, our plan failed, right?"

Connolly nodded.

"Which means that if it were to succeed this time, it would change the future entirely. Wouldn't this result in everyone and everything you knew from your time getting wiped out?"

"Correct," said Connolly in awe, marveling at the effortless brilliance of this man, whose speed of thought and insight, especially when it came to matters that someone from this time could never have been exposed to, was breathtaking.

Perhaps it *would* be worth the destruction of the world Connolly knew to see this extraordinary man play an important role in charting Rome's future course instead of Caligula. Who knew, with Dorso guiding the new emperor, perhaps long-lasting reforms could be implemented that would ultimately transform society. So much so that the far future could be spared from the likes of Hitler, Stalin, and others of their ilk.

So had the alien AI come to this same conclusion?

Or was its conclusion just the opposite? Did the cube want to *ensure* that Caligula came to power? Could it be that changing out a tyrant with a good man could lead to unforeseen consequences that might be devastating?

There was precedent for this, after all. His granddaughter, Kelly, and Justin Boyd, had made an equally unexpected calculation, electing not to kill a man whose hands were so bloody he made Caligula look like a *saint*. They could have killed Adolph Hitler in 1943, but had reasoned that the future would be better off by leaving this steaming pile of evil in place.

Jim Connolly wanted to scream at the top of his lungs from the immense frustration of it all. It was one thing not being *able* to carry out the best course of action.

It was quite another to have absolutely no idea what the best course of action even *was*.

Or worse, if a move done for the good of humanity might backfire in truly cataclysmic ways.

14

Lucius Sejanus was a towering bull of a man, strong, imposing, and intimidating. He wore shiny gold armor and a cape that was deep red, the color of blood, and also the color of Mars, the Roman god of war.

But his physical menace and his impressive uniform didn't stand out nearly as much as his raw arrogance, which shined through every bit as much as Dorso's magnetism.

He had arrived with several of his men in tow, who had taken the senator outside at sword point so the regent could have a private conversation with a stranger whose presence here both confused and intrigued him.

For good reason, Connolly decided. Sejanus had been confident that when he unraveled the conspiracy, whoever was involved would be well known to him.

But Jim Connolly was a total mystery. A forty-six-year-old man whose hands and body showed no signs of physical labor, who spoke perfect Latin, and yet whom neither Sejanus nor any of his men had ever seen before.

Sejanus studied Connolly with great interest, towering over the time traveler as he sat on the marble bench, where Sejanus's men had forced him, his ankles now shackled along with his wrists. The mutilated body of Dorso's fallen comrade remained in the room to further intimidate the prisoner, serving as a horrific portent of things to come.

Connolly gathered himself and fought not to think about this macabre omen. Instead, he stared deep into Sejanus's eyes, trying to size him up, while he awaited his captor's first words.

"Who *are* you?" said the regent finally. "And how do you have the audacity to look me in the eye?" he demanded. "You should be in awe, cowering in my presence," he added, seeming to be sincerely

taken aback.

As the de facto ruler of the entire Roman Empire, Connolly could imagine that Sejanus was used to even powerful men being overwhelmed by his prominence, power, and celebrity, and prostrating themselves before him.

Even those who didn't expect to die at his hands at any moment.

Connolly sighed. "I'm a stranger," he replied simply, as if this should explain everything. "A visitor to Rome from a far-off land—who is just passing through. A man who seems to have accidentally found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Sejanus ignored this protestation of innocence. "You should know that my men were spying on the meeting today from a distance. Seeing who would show up."

"What meeting?"

"Don't play stupid. You know what meeting. The one at the residence of Octavius Gallus. And we now have everyone in attendance under house arrest. One of them is sure to give you up."

"I'm not worried," said Connolly. "Because I have nothing to do with them."

Sejanus shook his head in contempt. "You expect me to believe you aren't working with Marcus Dorso?"

"Until today, I didn't even know he existed."

"He won't for long. It will take too long to get him to talk, so I plan to have him killed when we're done here. To make an example of him."

Connolly hoped that this was a bluff, but had a sinking feeling that it was not.

"You obviously knew him," said Sejanus. "When my men first came here to arrest him, they found *you* here also. Along with cuffs and a chain still affixed to the leg of the bench you're now on." His eyes narrowed. "So are you and the senator lovers?"

"Lovers?" repeated Connolly as if he hadn't heard right.

"Yes. The use of cuffs and chains for sex play is not unknown. And it makes a certain sort of sense," he continued, almost as if thinking aloud. "Dorso seems almost inhuman in his lack of indulgences. Too

pure to be true. He refuses to force slaves into sexual encounters, or even own them. Nor, to anyone's knowledge, has he ever slept with a man, woman, or child—slave or otherwise—despite the fact that people are drawn to him, of both sexes. With his wealth, looks, and charm, he could have his pick of partners.

"So I've wondered if this supposed chastity is nothing but a fraud," continued Sejanus. "A way to keep his own sordid, sleazy tastes hidden from the public. Outwardly wholesome, while privately chaining men like you so he can savage them like animals."

The regent rubbed his chin in thought. "And I can see why it would be critical for Dorso to keep these activities secret," he continued. "After all, among other things, his co-conspirators are appalled by *Tiberius's* sexual depravities. So they wouldn't be working to install Dorso in the emperor's place if they thought he might follow in Tiberius's footsteps."

What? thought Connolly, stifling a gasp. The plan had been for *Marcus Dorso* to replace Tiberius as emperor?

The senator had somehow failed to mention that little detail.

But it made perfect sense. Who else would it be? As Sejanus had said, people were naturally drawn to the handsome senator. If anyone had a chance of earning enough support to assume the mantle of emperor, it was Marcus Dorso.

"An interesting conjecture," said Connolly, "but there was nothing sexual about my captivity. I was chained here because I broke into his home. To steal from him. We had never laid eyes on each other before this."

The praetor leaned forward and shoved his thumb into Connolly's wound, ripping two stitches from their moorings and bringing excruciating pain, almost causing Connolly to black out. Sejanus held his thumb inside the wound for several agonizing seconds, his expression almost euphoric, as though he was getting sexual satisfaction from this intimate infliction of pain.

Sejanus finally removed his thumb and waited for Connolly's muted screams of agony to die out.

A cruel sneer came over the regent's face. "As much as I'd enjoy

torturing you to death," he said icily, gesturing to the freshly killed Roman nearby, "it tends to be messy. And I've had my fill for today. But you *really* need to start telling the truth, or I'll change my mind."

Connolly focused on quieting his racing heart, fearful of a repeat of the arrhythmia that had stricken him earlier.

"If you're merely a stranger and a thief," continued Sejanus calmly, "then why were you sitting with the senator at a table, unbound, when my men arrived? Why were you conversing with him as if you were close friends? And why did you work with Dorso to attack my men and knock them out?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Most importantly, why, before they died, did they tell me you had promised to point to additional conspirators?"

"They died?" said Connolly in dismay. "How can that be? After they came to, they should have been fine."

"They *were* fine. I had them killed after they finished their report. Any men who can be bested by unarmed civilians are of no use to me. They were an embarrassment to the Guard."

Connolly was sickened by this total disregard for human life, but didn't give Sejanus the satisfaction of a reaction.

"Now, I understand your impulse to protect Dorso," continued the regent, his voice taking on a more amiable tone. "I do. He seems to engender loyalty and respect. I've seen it. But you can't protect him. As I said, I plan to have him executed right after we're finished, anyway. But even more importantly, he isn't who you think he is. Not his background, or his goals. Did he tell you he planned to abolish slavery?"

Connolly remained silent.

"Of course he didn't!" said Sejanus, taking Connolly's silence for a no. "He didn't even tell his co-conspirators. He knew he would never get any meaningful support if it came out. If he were to abolish slavery, which would never be allowed, the empire wouldn't last a day. Not that he'd ever be able to convince even his staunchest ally to give up a single slave."

"What's your point?" asked Connolly bluntly.

“My point is that he’s played you for a fool!” said Sejanus in contempt. “And this isn’t the *only* secret he’s keeping. He can’t even tell his *allies* his real plans, or they would abandon him instantly. They would see just how massively delusional he really is.”

Sejanus studied his prisoner, attempting to gauge his reaction, but Connolly continued to maintain a poker face.

“He has other plans he isn’t sharing,” continued the acting emperor of Rome. “Most designed to gradually defang the empire. To tame the greatest warrior class ever seen in the history of the world.”

Sejanus leaned forward and shot Connolly a haughty smirk. “But it gets even *worse*. Because you aren’t following the man you think you are. Marcus Dorso is an *impostor*! He isn’t nobility. He isn’t even Roman!” he finished in disgust, thrusting these words at Connolly as if he believed they were daggers.

“What?” whispered Connolly in disbelief, unable to maintain his studied indifference.

A cruel, triumphant smile spread over the regent’s face. “You heard me. I’ve recently learned that Marcus was a mere *peasant* when he arrived in Rome. Almost eight years ago. A peasant and non-citizen who had the gall to use charm and lies to pass himself off as a patrician.”

Sejanus nodded slowly, relishing the chance to strip Dorso of his mask. “After years of this charade,” he continued, “burrowing his way ever deeper into politically connected hearts and minds, he became friends with a man named Cassius Dorso. Cassius was a wealthy nobleman whose sole heirs had died in battle. Marcus later hired two men to pretend to attack Cassius. When Marcus disrupted this staged attack, he made it look as though he had saved Cassius’s life in heroic fashion. Six months later, a grateful Cassius, increasingly taken in by Marcus’s charms, adopted him as his heir.”

Sejanus raised his eyebrows. “Two years after that,” he continued, “Cassius passed away, and Marcus Dorso as you know him today was born. Not too long after this, Marcus was appointed to the senate. A meteoric rise, but a wholly fraudulent one.”

Connolly found these revelations stunning. Assuming they were

true.

"So is this really the man you want to die for?" barked Sejanus. "Is this really a man worthy of letting yourself be carved up to protect? A man who will be dead in less than an hour."

He paused to let these questions sink in.

"But it gets worse still," continued Sejanus. "Much worse. Because I didn't tell you his *real* origins. After much further digging, I've learned that he was born a *Jew*. A despicable offshoot of humanity. When I'm made emperor, I plan to slaughter every last resident of our Judean province, the region from which he came."

Sejanus frowned deeply. "Ironically," he continued, "the man you know as Marcus Dorso comes from the same village as another Jew who has recently become a giant thorn in our side. A preacher who is giving us nothing but headaches in the region. One spewing repentance, and love, and a higher power than Rome."

Connolly turned white and suddenly felt weak, as if he might slide right off the bench he was on. "Who is the current governor of Judea?" he croaked out, his throat so dry the words barely managed to escape his lips.

"Pontius Pilate," said Sejanus, taken aback. "Why?"

Connolly barely kept his mouth from dropping open, and he felt as if his brain were on fire.

As an agnostic, he knew almost as little about Christianity as he did about history. But he did know the significance of the name Pontius Pilate.

"Tell me," he said to the praetor, fighting to stay calm, "this preacher, the one who is causing all of this trouble in Judea right now. Do you know his name?" He took a deep breath. "Is it *Jesus*, by any chance?"

Connolly gazed at the commander of Rome's Praetorian Guard eagerly, as if the man held the secret to eternal life, and braced himself for an answer he already knew.

15

"Jesus?" repeated Sejanus in confusion, mangling the name badly. "There is no such name in the entire empire."

Connolly realized his mistake in an instant. *Of course* Sejanus had never heard this name. Because English wouldn't be spoken for many centuries. Having learned sixteen languages, Connolly had the equivalent of a master's degree level of expertise in the field of linguistics.

In Spanish the "J" was pronounced like an "H" was in English. Hey-seuss rather than Jesus. The New Testament was written in Greek. In this language, the "J" was pronounced like a "Y." Yay-seuss rather than Jesus.

So until this name had left Connolly's lips, no one on Earth had ever uttered it precisely the way he had pronounced it.

Jesus's real name was thought to have been *Yeshua*, a Hebrew name popular with Jews at the time, and Jesus had probably spoken Aramaic. But the "J" sound was nowhere to be found in either of these tongues. It was only after the name Yeshua had been translated through a string of languages, being slightly changed each time, that the English name Jesus was born.

Connolly was about to rephrase the question when Sejanus obviated the need. "But enough about this preacher," he said irritably. "He's a sniveling, pathetic, weakling of a man, and not relevant to the subject at hand. So unimportant in the scheme of things that I haven't even bothered to learn his name. I only bring him up to show just how lowly Dorso's origins truly are. And just how duplicitous Dorso has been. The man who expects your total loyalty is the worst kind of fraud."

Connolly found himself unable to focus on Sejanus any longer. Instead, he was reeling inside.

Because even without Sejanus's confirmation, there could be no doubt of the Judean's identity. The man now preaching there had to be the historical Jesus Christ.

Of course he was.

Connolly had thought Marcus Dorso represented a pivotal player in history. But the attempted, or successful, removal of a Roman emperor—while a gargantuan historical change—couldn't hold a candle to the kind of historical change that would come about if *Jesus Christ's* actions were changed.

Hitler had been an immensely consequential figure. But the man now preaching in Judea made Hitler look like a historical *footnote*. In fact, Jesus Christ was arguably the single most consequential figure who had ever lived.

Connolly felt bile rise in his throat as the enormity of this realization struck home. Two of the most consequential, controversial figures in history, and he had managed to become deeply entangled in the histories of each.

What were the odds of that?

Had he not been so ignorant of history, he would have quickly realized that he was within spitting distance of Christ's era, and all that this portended. Especially given his knowledge of where the cube had ended up.

He had been blinded by ignorance, but more than that, by the mesmerizing, fascinating, shiny object in front of him. A man who appeared to be highly consequential.

But Dorso was only a means to an even more important end.

Connolly should have realized that Jesus Christ was the *real* target of the cube's quest. Again, who else?

The cube must have come to Dorso to have him influence his old village-mate. The real player in this exercise.

Whether you believed Jesus was a radical thinker, a prophet, or a god, he had stamped a footprint in history the size of the Grand Canyon, one that dwarfed even those of the greatest Roman emperors.

But what was the cube's intent? Did it want to stop Jesus this time? Had it decided that, all things considered, the namesake of

Christianity had been *bad* for the future?

Connolly had previously pondered this very idea, from an agnostic's perspective, without reaching a conclusion. Would the world be better off if Jesus had never existed?

The answer wasn't as simple as one would hope. The church had often opposed scientific advances when they conflicted with its teachings. Perhaps cosmology and evolution, in particular, could have seen an accelerated development if Jesus had never arisen. Who knew what effect this might have had.

Jesus had preached the importance of love. Of caring for others rather than killing them. His simple messages had been shrouded in compelling parables, but boiled down to peace, love, and understanding. Of turning the other cheek. Loving your neighbor as you would love yourself.

But this hadn't ended war and hate at all, as evidenced by Connolly's own era, when Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Tojo killed tens of millions in cold blood.

And after Jesus had been killed, with the only accounts of his life published long after his death, his followers had been free to interpret his teachings in their own way. And different interpretations had arisen, and given rise to different sects.

In the end, well before Hitler arrived on the world stage, any number of bloody wars and pogroms were initiated in Jesus's name. Even knowing human nature as he did, Connolly couldn't comprehend how two factions who both believed strongly in Jesus's message of love and understanding could go to war or commit atrocities in the messenger's name.

But that is what had often happened.

So it was possible the world *would be* better off without Jesus in it.

But the opposite was also quite possible. That despite the unintended consequences of Jesus's teachings, and their ripples throughout history, the *good* that his presence engendered more than outweighed the bad. And this was true, even if you didn't consider Jesus to be divine.

But if you *did*, then there could be no argument at all. In that case,

Jesus's presence was, literally, a *godsend*.

So maybe the alien AI had concluded that Jesus's role didn't need to be suppressed, it needed to be *enhanced*. Perhaps if Jesus would have had more time to complete his ministry, the unintended consequences of his teachings could be avoided.

In this case, the AI might have wanted to *delay* Jesus's execution. Or prevent him from being executed entirely.

Regardless of the cube's intent, Connolly couldn't imagine why it suddenly thought it had a license to tinker with a figure this monumental—on its own recognizance.

He also couldn't help but consider once again how Dorso might fit in. What did the cube want of him?

Dorso's capture had further riled Sejanus up when it came to this preacher in Judea. Sejanus despised Jews, this much was obvious, and learning that Dorso had originated from the same region as a man who was stirring up trouble in the Judean province had intensified this hatred. Could this change lead Sejanus to attempt a genocide in this region *now*, even though he had expressed a willingness to hold off until he became emperor?

In the history Connolly knew, he had *never* become emperor, so this had never happened. But if Dorso's arrest proved the catalyst for Sejanus to move up his timetable, this genocide could remove Jesus from the stage well before he had left it originally, and in a much different way.

It could be that the alien AI, by doing something as simple as urging Dorso to leave before Sejanus's men arrived, could make sure that Dorso's capture didn't fan the flames of the praetor's Jewish ire.

The bottom line was that even if Dorso was what he seemed, an extremely decent man, this didn't mean his maneuverings to oust Tiberius couldn't accidentally play a pivotal role that could backfire on Jesus.

Connolly's granddaughter Kelly was a wonderful woman, but had she killed Hitler—done what her decency had demanded—she might have cemented the rise of totalitarianism for hundreds or thousands of years to come.

It was also possible that Dorso *was* truly evil. A pure psychopath. These types were often smooth, charming, and convincing. Inhumanly charismatic. Perhaps he *had* been putting on an act all along, and was just as Machiavellian and bloodthirsty as Sejanus.

Again, a situation that was impossible to unravel without considerable further information. Information that was more critical than ever that he find.

Connolly decided he had no other choice but to trust the cube's motivations. It, and the aliens behind it, had the power to destroy Earth on a whim, yet hadn't. And it at least claimed it would only take instructions from human beings it deemed well-intentioned, who wanted to use the cube for constructive purposes.

He had considered leaving the decision as to whether or not to carry out the cube's wishes to Dorso. But he now decided it was important for him to push the senator into doing what it asked, no matter how counterintuitive or absurd.

All of this ran through Connolly's extraordinary mind in mere seconds as Sejanus paused to let him digest what he had said.

"So what will it be?" continued the regent. "Will you tell me what I need to know? Or will you die horribly to protect a lowly plebeian? Worse, a mad, duplicitous Jew."

Connolly allowed his features to slowly harden, and his eyes to burn with white-hot rage. "I'll tell you what you want to know," he said decisively. "I'm as disgusted as you are by who Marcus Dorso really is. In fact, I'd love to tear his head from his shoulders right now for his lies and betrayals."

Connolly somehow found a way to ratchet his rage up even further. "But that's not what I want most," he growled bitterly. "What I *need* most. Tiberius has to die!" he shouted with the crazed fury of a rabid dog. "*Horribly*! I only backed Dorso because I thought he could make that happen."

Connolly paused and held Sejanus's gaze, visibly trying to calm himself. "But now that you've shared your ambition to replace Tiberius," he said in more muted tones, "it's clear that I've bet on the wrong . . . *chariot*. So I want to serve *you*. I have more to offer than

just identifying additional conspirators. All I ask in return is that you take the emperor down. *Soon*. And that his death be as slow and painful as possible. I'd also like to watch, if possible. Or even better, to participate."

"You despise Tiberius *that* much?"

"You have no idea."

"Then tell me about it," said Lucius Sejanus. "You have my full attention."

16

Jim Connolly focused on the searing pain in his shoulder, the unfairness of his predicament, and all the atrocities committed throughout history, including those he had witnessed firsthand as Otto Richter of the Third Reich.

He wasn't a good actor, but he needed to sell pain, anguish, and rage like no one ever had, and he certainly had his own deep pool to draw from.

"I'll keep this short," said Connolly, biting off each word as if it were acid. "I'm a Roman who married a Greek. We lived on the island of Corfu for some time. Happily. And then Tiberius's men took both of my children. To use as his personal *playthings*," he spat, showing depths of hatred that even he didn't know he had in him.

"Are they still on Capri?"

Connolly shook his head and put on an expression of absolute heartbreak. He tried to tear up, but without success. "No," he replied, the word coming out as a hoarse whisper. "After years of sexual abuse of the most despicable kind, they both passed on. My sources say from illness, but I don't believe it."

His hands balled into fists and his remorse turned to rage. "But the day Tiberius took them from us, I dedicated my life to killing this monster," he added, seething. "Whatever it takes."

Sejanus nodded slowly, taking it all in. "Go on," he said after several seconds of silence.

"That's it. There's nothing more to tell."

"Not quite," corrected Sejanus. "How did you end up working with Dorso?"

Connolly's mind raced to come up with a plausible story, knowing he had but a second or two before an extended pause would arouse suspicion. "I'm a wealthy man," he began, making up his story as he went. "I hired spies here in Rome to try to find a chink in Tiberius's

armor. A way I could kill him, or have him killed. Six months ago, one of my spies got wind of Dorso and his cabal, and their plan to topple Tiberius. My spy reported that powerful, accomplished men were beginning to fall in line behind Dorso, because they believed he had the charm to pull this off. After arranging to meet with Dorso, my spy agreed with this assessment."

"So you came here to offer your services to this impostor."

"I did. But now I'm eager to shift my support to you. Because it was never about Dorso. I'd support *Hades himself* if I thought he could topple Tiberius."

"So you're comparing me to the Greek god of the underworld?"

"Of course not. I just want to get across that I'm willing to do anything—*anything*—to see Tiberius dead. And I have some special skills that I think you'll find useful. I can pick up languages at great speed, for instance, and speak each like a native. Which would make me an excellent spy," he added in flawless Greek to drive home the point.

"I also possess a device," he added, "in the form of a harmless-looking stick. A cylinder. Invented by a brilliant man I know in Corfu. It's smooth and lightweight. No sharp edges or points. Yet it can take torture to a level never seen before. I have no idea how it works. It seems like magic to me. But my friend tells me it somehow affects the pain centers of the body in mysterious ways. But without doing any actual bodily harm."

"Do you take me for a *fool?*" said Sejanus, suddenly enraged. "I already doubted your story. It was too neat. Too convenient. But you really think you can trick me with tales of mysterious sticks!" he shouted, spittle flying from his mouth.

"Not a trick," insisted Connolly. "I can prove it to you."

"Don't insult my intelligence! And even if you could prove it, why would I care? Even if you could inflict torture without damaging the body, so what? I *like* damaging the body."

"The damage you do leads to death in fairly short order," Connolly hastened to explain. "And death is a *mercy* for your enemies. It lets them off too easily. With what I have, you can prolong the

torture indefinitely. You can deliver agony forever. A prisoner might pray for death, but it will never come."

The time traveler paused. "I've seen it used twice," he continued. "Both times the subject screamed so long and hard, for so many hours straight, that he finally passed out. But then he awoke again, ready for more. Forever."

Connolly could see the wheels beginning to turn in Sejanus's head.

"I can see how this *could* offer certain advantages," admitted the regent. "If it wasn't just a fantasy you've come up with for reasons of your own."

"It's no fantasy!" insisted Connolly. "I have three of these sticks in a wooden box outside. I brought them to show Dorso. These are a slightly different type, which need to work in concert. If you let me wield them, I can *prove* it to you. You told me it would be very difficult to get Dorso to talk. That you plan to have him executed momentarily. But I'm begging you, let me use these sticks on him before you kill him. I can get him to talk. You'll see. He'll be shrieking so loud he'll be heard on the island of Capri.

"If I'm lying," he hastened to add, "and they don't work as I say, then cut out my tongue and flay me alive. Or *worse*. But if I *am* telling the truth, let me kill Dorso myself, to demonstrate my loyalty to you. And then consider using me as a spy. Let me help you kill Tiberius. Take revenge for what he did to my children."

Sejanus considered for several long seconds. "If I don't find a box with red sticks just outside the door," he said, "you'll wish that I only flayed you alive."

"The sticks are there," said Connolly. "And Dorso will be screaming in agony before you know it."

"He'd better be," said Sejanus. "Because if he isn't, I'll make sure that *you* are."

17

Jim Connolly stood on a path at the edge of the expansive gardens that surrounded Dorso's estate and breathed in the fragrant air. The gardens were eclectic, but the arrangement somehow worked, logistically and aesthetically, with herbs and vegetables on one side, and blooming roses, marigolds, and violets on the other, punctuated by magnificent mulberry trees, complete with clumps of small, raspberry-like red and purple fruit.

His leg restraints had been removed and he stepped forward a few feet to see around a tree, allowing himself the luxury of taking in a panoramic view of his surroundings. It was his first trip outside since arriving, and he didn't intend to waste even one of the few seconds that he might have left to live. If this was his only chance to gaze upon the landscape of one of the seven hills of Rome, in what he now knew to be the early first century—at least by modern reckoning—he wasn't about to miss it.

The air was cool and the sky a crystal-clear blue. Beyond the gardens, olive trees, taller and fuller than any he had ever seen, were clustered all around, having been purposely grown in groves for shade and fruit, and he took special care to study those to the west, in direct line with the Tiber River.

Connolly knew that no vegetation was more emblematic of the Mediterranean region than the olive tree, and the presence of these iconic trees made *his* presence here seem real, in ways that legionnaires dressed in full Roman regalia could not.

Since the time of the Egyptian Empire, an olive branch had been used as a symbol of peace, and had even earned a special mention in the Old Testament, when a dove had brought an olive leaf back to Noah to herald the presence of dry land nearby. This symbol had since migrated to the Greek and Roman Empires, and then to the modern world, and the idiom "extending an olive branch" was now

understood across cultures to mean an offer of reconciliation.

Given his circumstances, Connolly didn't see these particular olive trees as heralding peace. But he did have high hopes that they might herald *survival*.

Unfortunately, this was something that very much remained to be seen.

Sejanus had been speaking with two of his men, giving the prisoner a temporary reprieve, but all three now joined Connolly and ushered him beyond the boundaries of the gardens, where the impostor who had become Marcus Dorso was standing in a large clearing.

Dorso's hands were shackled, but not his feet, and he was surrounded by loose groupings of soldiers, nine in total, each armed with a sword, dagger, and spear. The four legionnaires nearest the senator formed the corners of a square around him, with each soldier standing about ten feet away with their swords drawn and ready, cutting off any possibility of escape.

The senator looked Connolly up and down as he approached, and appeared relieved to see him in one piece. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"*Never speak to me again!*" shouted Connolly, almost hysterically. "No more false concern! No more lies! It's time for you to pay for your deceit!"

Dorso was taken aback, but remained calm, at least outwardly. Even while awaiting death, and after being cruelly scolded by a man he had thought was sympathetic to his cause, he somehow continued to radiate charisma.

Sejanus led Connolly twenty feet away from the senator and then stopped. He opened the wooden box with the three handheld red flares inside and set it on the ground beside Connolly's feet. "Are you still sticking to your ludicrous story?" he asked. "Because I've never seen anything that looked as harmless as these sticks."

"They *are* harmless. Unless I touch them in a certain way, and then touch them to a subject in a certain way."

The regent shook his head, looking every bit as dubious as before.

He reached into the box and removed the three sticks, inspecting them carefully. He ran his hand along their uniform surfaces, judged their weight, and brought them close to his eyes to look for anything he might be missing. “What are these made from?” he asked. “I’ve never seen material like this before.”

Connolly shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t make them. I just know they work.”

“Unless these are shoved into a body cavity, they have no chance of causing any pain. They have no bite, and they’re so light they couldn’t beat a hummingbird to death.”

“Trust me, they work wonders. Just the way I said. Can I demonstrate?”

Sejanus issued a cold smile. “You’ve put a lot of energy into this game of yours,” he said. “So while I’m still sure you’re lying, I’m intrigued to learn why. To find out what you hope to gain from this ruse. For the life of me, I can’t see it. But afterward, when you’ve revealed yourself to be as big a fraud as your senator friend, you will quickly come to regret it.”

With this said, the praetor held out the flares for Connolly to take.

The prisoner sighed. “I need my hands free to use them properly,” he said.

Sejanus surveyed the clearing, noting the four sword-wielding soldiers about ten feet from Dorso, and the nine other underlings who were spread out nearby. “Uncuff him!” he barked at one of his men, who quickly carried out this order.

Once Connolly’s hands were freed, he took the three sticks from Sejanus and slid them securely back inside the inner pocket they had been in when he had first arrived in Rome. “You won’t be disappointed,” he said confidently. He then turned his back on the regent and walked slowly toward Dorso, who looked on warily, having no idea what was going on.

As Connolly moved forward, the soldiers parted in front of him like Moses at the Red Sea. When he got to within seven feet of Dorso, he stopped, removed the three flares from his inner pocket, and set them down on the ground beside him.

“You’re an impostor!” he thundered at the senator for all to hear. “Nothing but a filthy peasant! I should kill you! But death lets you off too easily!”

As he finished his last word, Connolly raced forward as if he were blitzing a quarterback, hitting Dorso cleanly with his shoulders and driving him to the ground, ripping out two additional stitches in the process. The moment they landed he inched himself closer to the senator’s ear. “When you see smoke,” he whispered rapidly, “we need to sprint to the olive grove to the west.”

Connolly rolled off Dorso’s body and brought himself to his feet, taking several deep breaths to try to delay his heart from racing away and killing him.

“Get up!” he shouted at the senator, backtracking to where he had left the three flares. He picked them up and held them above his head for all to see. “And prepare to suffer!” he added, giving Sejanus and his soldiers a show they wouldn’t soon forget.

“I said, get up!” he repeated as he neared the senator once again. “Even the *dirt* deserves better than to touch filth like you!”

The moment the senator rose, Connolly violently twisted the top of one flare and heard the satisfying click of activation. Thick red smoke burst out of the top of the flare like a geyser, and in seconds was producing a billowing wall of cover that was growing with exceptional speed.

“Come on!” said Connolly urgently to the man beside him, who had been shocked into temporary paralysis, like everyone there, by a spectacle that no one in this time had ever seen.

Connolly tossed the belching flare toward the two sword-carrying soldiers nearest their path to the tree line, and as he had hoped, both quickly backed away from the gushing red smoke as if he had thrown a cobra into their midst. For all they knew a single touch or inhalation of the otherworldly smoke was deadly. And they had no idea if a raging, invisible fire was responsible for what they were seeing, or if the blood-red smoke was being produced by the god of war himself.

Connolly grabbed Dorso’s tunic and pulled him lower, and they both rushed through the now-large gap between the two guards. When

they made it past all the others who had been stationed in the westerly direction, Connolly activated another flare and pitched it backwards to further cover their retreat. The sheer volume and speed of release of the gushing smoke was extraordinary, even to Connolly's eyes, and it created another living red wall that blocked vision completely while the two prisoners made their way to the cover of dozens of olive trees.

Connolly had thrown this second flare at just the right time, as the soldiers—prodded on by a furious regent—began to regain their senses and courage. Even so, rather than rush forward toward the growing smoke barrier, several launched spears at the retreating prisoners, with one missing Dorso by mere inches, even though he was totally concealed from view.

When they reached the cover of the olive grove, Connolly led Dorso in about three trees deep and pulled him into a low crouch behind a thick trunk.

Once they were both protected by the tree, Connolly whipped his head back around toward the east. "Stay back or die, Sejanus!" he screamed out.

His heart was now racing furiously in his chest, getting more out of rhythm by the second, and he guessed he only had a few minutes of consciousness left before its erratic beating finally did him in.

He turned back to his companion. "My heart's giving out," he said quickly. "Remember, find the cube. I'll hold them back for as long as I can."

"I can't let you—"

"Another word of protest and I'll kill you myself!" snapped Connolly, forcefully enough to finally get through Dorso's thick skull as several spears sailed by, one sticking into the trunk that they were huddled behind. "Can you see Sejanus's horse through the trees?"

Dorso nodded. It was right where he had guessed it would be.

"Looks like we're in luck," said Connolly as smoke from the second flare continued to billow out in a volume that seemed impossible given the size of the tube from which it was emanating. But this magic trick wouldn't last forever.

“Ditch the horse before you reach the Tiber,” he instructed Dorso. “It’s too recognizable. And remember, wait for one of their men to see you and then throw yourself into the river. The cube will carry you away underwater. They need to think you’re dead.”

By now the wind had blown some of the red smoke into a few of the closest soldiers, and they had discovered that its touch didn’t hurt them. Off in the distance, Sejanus could be heard urging them forward, insisting that they breach the remaining wall of smoke to go after the prisoners.

“Go!” demanded Connolly, as waves of dizziness began washing over him. “I’ll hold them off for as long as I can,” he added as he activated and threw the last of his flares, resulting in another thick geyser of smoke that temporarily delayed the soldiers’ charge.

“Thank you!” said Dorso. “I wish I could repay you for saving my life.”

“You can,” said Connolly. “By doing what the cube asks of you. Promise me you will. No matter what.”

“I promise,” shouted Dorso as he began racing off toward Sejanus’s horse and the river, moving more quickly than Connolly had expected given that his shackled hands couldn’t help provide balance. “I swear to it.”

“Then your debt is paid in full!” yelled Connolly after Dorso’s retreating figure. He watched the running figure recede for a few more seconds and then turned back toward the east, toward the encroaching soldiers, while the world continued spinning around him.

“Sejanus!” he shouted. “Call a halt *now!* I have an object that will melt off your skin. If any of your men take another step, I’ll use it.”

Just as Connolly was about to call out additional bluffs, he became too lightheaded to remain standing, and he toppled to the hard ground. He managed to roll onto his back, but knew that he would never rise again.

Connolly had no idea how much time passed, but when he finally managed to open his eyes the blurry but still imposing figure of Lucius Sejanus was looming over him, stomping down on the wound in his shoulder, sending daggers of searing pain throughout his body.

Sejanus then gripped his sword tightly with both hands and barked an order at a subordinate, who knelt behind Connolly's head, grabbed a handful of hair, and yanked back to extend and expose his neck. The moment this was done, Lucius Sejanus, commander of the Praetorian Guard and regent of first-century Rome, brought the sharp edge of his sword down with blinding speed and delivered a mighty, precision blow to the center of Connolly's jugular, severing his head cleanly from his shoulders, and snuffing out the greatest scientific mind humanity had ever produced, nineteen centuries before his birth.

At the instant of his death, Connolly's biggest regret was that he would never learn the solution to the most intriguing mystery he had ever encountered. Never learn what the cube had wanted with Dorso, and if the senator would survive.

And most tragically of all, he would never learn if his actions here would *help* the future he had known come about—or were destined to cause *cataclysmic* damage to the timeline that could never be repaired.

PART 4

“There’s no fight we cannot win
Just you and I
Defying gravity
With you and I
Defying gravity
They’ll never bring us down.”

—Defying Gravity, *Wicked* (Broadway Play)

18

Spokane, Washington, 2027

Kelly Connolly-Boyd and her husband reclined in the self-driving car they had purchased three days after their return from 1943—under false identities, just in case—and stared at the miniature holographic version of Colonel Tom Osborne hovering in front of the windshield. They had owned the car now for three weeks, a black Tesla, having been traumatized inside a self-driving Lexus in a past life, through no fault of the car. Still, superstition was hard to eliminate entirely, even for the most rational, and neither of them would ever feel comfortable in a Lexus again.

"Anything noteworthy to report, Major?" asked the perfect hologram of Colonel Osborne.

Major Justin Boyd shook his head. "Not really," he replied. "Just that we're starting to hit our stride. We're getting more efficient at moving the ball forward every day."

They had arrived back in 2027 three and a half weeks earlier, but it seemed to Boyd that they had already chalked up six months of accomplishments. Things were moving quickly. No surprise given that they were a highly motivated team with hundreds of millions of dollars to draw on, and the ability to tap into the immense resources available to the head of American black ops.

In just the first five hours the time travelers had been back, Shen Ning had been captured. They had briefed Harry Salazar and recruited him into their new group. Shen had *escaped.* And the newlyweds had moved into a fully furnished safe house on the outskirts of Spokane, properly secluded, which Tom Osborne had arranged for them. A massive luxury home, no less, six-thousand-square feet in size, and surrounded by eight acres of private land.

And this had been their *least* eventful five hours.

There was important work to be done each day, and important lovemaking to be done in the evenings, although they did manage to

average six hours of sleep per night, most often after falling into a coma-like state, naked, wrapped around each other, and mentally and sexually spent.

Osborne and Salazar had officially shut Uru down two days after the time travelers' return, citing the likelihood that the missing cube would never be found. They had sent all scientists home with one year's pay, telling them to think of it as a sabbatical, and knowing Chinese intelligence would also get word of Uru's closure.

A day later, a team of thirty-five surveillance experts from around the country spent almost twenty hours sweeping the facility for bugs that could only be detected visually. In the end, they identified twenty-seven Chinese surveillance drones, made to look like tiny, camouflaged houseflies, a technical marvel that China had somehow brute-forced to fruition as only they could do.

Once found, these twenty-seven fly-drone bugs had been sent to yet another black site for study and analysis. Tom Osborne earned high marks from the president and secretary of defense for bringing these to light. The US had been caught with its pants down, but at least now had the chance to cover itself with a towel.

During this time, computer and robotics experts managed to produce hundreds of bug-sweeper drones, each with specialized programming and optics. These drones had been programmed to fly in preset patterns within the Uru facility on a daily basis, avoiding people and obstacles, until they had collectively taken an exquisitely high-resolution visual survey of every square inch of it.

Uru had been infiltrated by bugs once, but this would not be allowed to happen again.

Finally, at Osborne's direction, the entrance to Uru's subterranean facility—which had been disguised as a small factory—was made to appear shuttered, to further sell its closure to their Chinese friends. A number of days later, scaffolding was built out from the side of the faux factory abutting the woods, with particleboard planks on top, to prevent the few entrants to the "closed" facility from being seen by any lurking satellites.

The Uru site had already been used to study the cube, and was

crammed with specialized equipment vital for their needs, so it would serve as a temporary headquarters for the fledgling new group—which Osborne had temporarily named *Rogue*. Justin Boyd was put in charge of selecting a new site, and overseeing the construction of a new subterranean headquarters, which they hoped could be ready in record time, perhaps six to eight months.

"How about you, Kelly?" asked the colonel. "How's the recruitment going?"

"Painfully slow so far. But Harry and I plan to press some of the new recruits into helping us, so things will start to accelerate. We've put together a dream list of scientists. Assuming most pan out, we'll have the greatest collection of geniuses ever assembled."

"Certainly the most thoroughly vetted," said the colonel.

"Tell me about it," said Kelly in exasperation. "If not for your resources, we couldn't even begin to go forward."

Osborne had ordered the NSA to do a deep dive into every scientist on the list. If these detailed histories and profiles didn't raise any red flags, Kelly or Salazar would need to reach out to them and bring them into the picture with painstaking care, over weeks and even months. Ultimately, they would need to meet each scientist in person, perhaps multiple times, to get a final read on their trustworthiness, beliefs, and character, all in the presence of lie-detection equipment.

"Sorry it's going so slowly," said Osborne.

"Thanks, Colonel, but it'll be worth it. And I did bring this on myself."

Kelly had insisted they go to herculean lengths to only recruit the most decent, incorruptible people in the world.

"What percentage of the scientists who pass your stringent entrance exam do you think will drop everything to join us?" asked the colonel.

"A hundred," she replied with conviction. "Once I show them what the cube can do, they'll be begging to join."

She and Salazar were finding it much easier to recruit key scientists who had already been with Uru. These were well-known

quantities, already familiar with the cube. After further vetting, she and the former director had brought almost a quarter of them back on board, demonstrating the cube's capabilities from deep within the Uru facility.

When the cube wasn't in use, Kelly stored it where it had previously resided within Uru, inside a large room encased by a foot of transparent aluminum, three feet of concrete, and a thousand feet of granite.

She and Boyd made sure that the combination locks securing the twenty-five-ton blast doors leading into the room were also engaged. This hadn't been necessary before, as the cube wasn't going *anywhere*. But now they couldn't put it back into its immovable lockdown mode without China's dark energy detector discovering its location.

But even if the cube itself was no longer locked down, it was inside the mother of all vaults, deep underground, at a facility whose only entrance contained enough automated armaments to repel an army, making it as snug as the gold in Fort Knox.

The perfect hologram of Osborne gestured at his subordinate. "Any leads on the location of China's cube?"

"Not a one," replied Boyd miserably. He and the colonel had split their efforts, but neither had so far managed to move the needle a single millimeter. "And you? Any news?"

"Yeah," said Osborne with a frown. "*Bad* news."

"Go ahead," said Boyd with a sigh. "We're listening."

"I just got intel that China is stepping up its efforts to develop a dark energy generator—in a very big way. When they get this single-minded, they press thousands of their best scientists into service. Their best still aren't as good as our best. But the Thomas Edison thing about success being more about perspiration than inspiration seems to work for them."

"Additional manpower doesn't *always* speed things up," said Kelly. "Yes, perspiration is important. But it's also true that nine women can't have a baby in a month."

Osborne laughed. "I hadn't heard that one," he said. "Unfortunately, in this case, manpower does help. I shared this

intelligence with the Haycock group." He looked at Boyd and raised his eyebrows. "You know, the team whose prototype dark energy generator you shot to death in your rental car so the Chinese wouldn't get it."

"How could I forget," said the major with a wry smile.

"Given the additional resources China is bringing to bear," continued Osborne, "and the approaches our intel says they're favoring, Haycock believes there's now a fifty/fifty chance they'll get to a working generator in as early as three months. They may *never* get there, true. But if they do, it could be alarmingly soon."

Boyd frowned. "Any chance they won't think to try it on the cube?"

"Almost none," said Osborne. "*You* thought it was worth a try, yourself, and you aren't a scientist."

"Any way to speed up our efforts to build a dark energy detector?" asked Boyd. After Shen's escape, they had decided that building such a device of their own was the most certain way to find China's cube.

"It's already our top priority," said Osborne, "and we haven't spared any resources. So we're still looking at five months—at the earliest."

Kelly frowned. "Which means there's a good chance the Chinese perfect their generator before then, and we're totally screwed."

Osborne shook his head. "It won't come to that," he said. "We'll just have to find it *without* a detector. Justin and I need to step up our game. And quickly."

"Understood, Colonel," said Boyd grimly.

"Fortunately, I'm not losing any sleep," said the floating holographic figure. "Because I have absolute faith in you, Major. Over the years, I've seen you pull one rabbit out of your hat after another. So I know you'll find a way."

The corners of Boyd's mouth turned up into a wry smile. "Thanks for not putting any added pressure on me."

"I'm doing you a favor," replied the colonel with a smile of his own. "Just remember what Patton said: *Pressure makes diamonds*."

"Well, yeah," said the major in amusement. "If you're a lump of

coal. If you're a human being, that same pressure turns you into splatter. Like a bug on a windshield."

19

Commander Shen Ning stared at the monitor that covered the entire wall of his spacious office and his breath caught in his throat.

“Lin!” he shouted to his personal AI. “Pause video! Go back three minutes and then play at normal speed.”

The AI did as he asked, and when Shen got to the footage he had thought he’d seen, his eyes bulged out of his head. “Freeze here!” he commanded.

He studied the screen in disbelief. “*Impossible*,” he whispered to himself.

He shook his head to clear it and closed his eyes, wondering if the disturbing images would disappear.

But when his eyes reopened, nothing had changed.

Shen’s mind raced, trying to figure out the significance of what he was seeing. Since he had escaped back to China, he had thrown himself into work with a vengeance, determined to find the missing American cube, even if the woman behind its disappearance, the key to it all, had been blown to smithereens.

But he had remained completely stymied.

Fortunately, this was also true of the Americans. So much so that they had closed down the Spokane facility within days of his return and had disbanded their team, throwing in the towel.

While this closure was a promising sign that the US hadn’t reclaimed its cube, it had blown up in China’s face. Somehow, the Americans had discovered that the facility had been monitored, and managed to find and remove every last fly drone. This was yet another disaster for Chinese Intelligence, nullifying a huge technology advantage that China had briefly enjoyed.

After the Spokane facility had been shuttered, satellites showed it to be as dead as a ghost town for weeks. No guard manned the gate,

the parking lot remained empty, and several members of the team were already interviewing for other jobs.

Satellite surveillance was soon suspended, and the satellite redeployed to targets offering a richer intelligence bounty.

But Shen had remained suspicious. So after two weeks were up, he had insisted on turning the satellites back on the facility, just to get another peek, and had found that scaffolding had been built out from the side of the "factory" that abutted the woods.

But why? Had this scaffolding been built as an initial step toward repair of the outer facility, or further construction? That's how it looked. Innocent and aboveboard. The same makeshift interlocking steel beams and wood planks he had seen countless times at construction sites, even flecked with paint and bits of dried stucco.

Still, Shen wondered if this scaffolding wasn't serving another purpose. Allowing personnel to sneak into the facility from that side without being spotted from above. Perhaps the site wasn't as closed as they had been led to believe.

Even though satellites would be blind on that side, there were other means to find out who might be visiting. Shen had guessed that while the inside of the facility was being constantly combed for bugs, the outside was unchecked. So he positioned a fly drone on a tree just beyond the scaffolding to watch for possible visitors, and hoped for the best.

And what he had caught in his net was beyond his wildest expectations. He had thought he might find personnel from another black research group scouting the facility, hoping to take over now that Uru had been scattered to the winds.

But after fast-forwarding through almost eight hours of footage, he had gotten the biggest shock of his life.

Because the two people now on the screen trying to sneak in, the two people he had caught with their hands in the cookie jar, were Dr. Kelly Connolly and Major Justin Boyd.

Two people who were very much *dead*.

Dead beyond the shadow of a doubt.

He, himself, had been watching as they were blown to bits at the

epicenter of an epic explosion.

Shen studied the footage even more carefully now, wondering if he was seeing body doubles. But when it became clear that Kelly Connolly was carrying a white cube in her right hand, he knew this wasn't the case.

All in all, given their spectacular deaths, they looked remarkably good.

The commander fell back in his chair in disbelief. What did this mean?

He fast-forwarded through six more hours of the feed and caught the two Americans exiting, but this time there was no sign of the cube. They must have left it inside. And they hadn't returned it to its immovable form, or China's dark energy detector would have alerted him.

It was the ultimate tease. The cube remained light enough for China to take, but it was still beyond their grasp. The absence of the feeble guard in front of the factory facade meant nothing. The facility was all but impregnable, with enough automated firepower to fend off any attack. And he was certain it would be stored inside the room built specially just for it, which could withstand a thermonuclear explosion.

Shen frowned in frustration at this and returned his focus to the question at hand: how could the two Americans still be *alive*?

There had always been reasonable explanations as to why Dr. Connolly's countrymen might want her dead. Perhaps as payback for her theft of a priceless, omnipotent alien relic. Or maybe because she knew too much, and they wanted to make sure she never fell into the wrong hands, the very reason Chinese Intelligence had just turned five of its enhanced commandos into slag in the Sonoran Desert.

The mystery hadn't been why the Americans had killed their own, but why they had done it so *publicly*.

But now the answer was obvious.

Because they *hadn't* killed them. It had been nothing but a charade. A brilliant ploy to throw China off the scent once and for all, convincing them that the cube and the woman who knew its secrets

were both gone forever.

They had made a public spectacle of her death, and the death of the American major, to be *sure* the Chinese noticed. They had been *advertising* the fact.

Shen was technically adept, but he had no idea how it was possible to stage such a flawless show. However it had been done, it had been ingenious. With Chinese Intelligence thinking Dr. Connolly and the EHO major were dead, they would be off the radar forever. The two Americans could walk freely in front of scores of cameras without fear that facial recognition would identify them—because no one would think to try. Not when the last time their faces had been seen, they had been sprayed over an entire woodland clearing.

Shen couldn't help but admire the plan. By pretending to kill Kelly Connolly, and then their entire Enigma Cube program, the Americans had thrown Chinese Intelligence hopelessly off track.

It was absolutely brilliant. And it would have worked, had Shen not been so stubborn.

But now it had backfired. In one fell swoop, he had found both the cube and the person who knew how to control it.

Which changed *everything*.

"Lin," he said to his virtual assistant, "contact Minister Yang's AI and arrange for an immediate call. Invoke Priority-One urgency."

"Right away, Commander. And if he asks the reason for this degree of urgency?"

Shen thought for just a moment. "Tell him that Kelly Connolly and Justin Boyd are much less dead than we had thought," he said simply.

20

The newlyweds—who had technically been married for eighty-six years—finished making love inside their massive, opulent safe-house residence and separated, pulling a sheet up over their naked bodies, and moving to either side of the king-size bed to facilitate conversation.

Kelly closed her eyes as her breathing and heartrate finally returned to normal. It wasn't entirely fair. Boyd had the stamina of a dozen men, maybe more. He could run a marathon and maintain a metronomic heartbeat throughout. Could go almost twenty minutes without taking a single breath.

Twenty minutes.

In one way this was heaven for her, making him the best lover in world history. But she felt as if there was no way she could measure up.

Still, she had to keep reminding herself that she was only human, while he was . . . a little bit more. And that he had yet to offer up any complaints when it came to her performance in bed.

"I'm glad we finally have the chance to talk," she said. She had been on one recruiting call after another all day long, and Boyd was busy with security, the new facility, and an array of other important duties.

"Yeah, I'm eager to catch up too."

"We could have caught up *before* we made love," she noted.

Boyd shrank back in horror. "Now that's just crazy talk," he said with a grin. "I wasn't *that* eager to catch up."

She laughed. "Well, yeah, if we don't find China's cube, the fate of humanity might hang in the balance. But sex first. You have to have your priorities straight."

"Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"Saying it when you're naked doesn't count," replied Kelly. "In the

heat of passion, you'd say the same thing to a blow-up doll."

"Well, yeah. But that's only because a blow-up doll is the perfect woman. No brains and can't talk back."

Kelly punched him on the shoulder in mock protest, but couldn't help but grin, knowing his tastes ran just the opposite.

"So what do you want to discuss?" asked Boyd.

"First, I've been thinking we need to change the name of our group. *Rogue* is horrible. Sounds like an *X-men* character. And way too on the nose."

"Yeah, it is pretty bad."

"I never liked Uru either," admitted Kelly. "Yes, it's the metal used to make Thor's immovable hammer—which is clever—but I felt silly every time I said it. Still, Rogue might be even worse."

"Have anything in mind?"

Kelly paused for effect. "*Prometheus*," she said with a dramatic flair, as if she were a classically trained Shakespearean actress.

Boyd paused for several long seconds, as though considering. "Right," he said finally. "After the Greek Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind as a gift."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Did you really know that, or was that a cheat?"

"It hurts me that you'd even ask," he replied, feigning innocence.

"And?"

"Okay, Sage may have helped a *little*. But in what world is using a personal AI to project instant information on smart contact lenses, without anyone knowing, a cheat?"

"In *every* world," said Kelly, fighting to keep a straight face.

"Would it be better if I had Sage speak the information secretly through my comm?"

"I don't think you're understanding the concept of cheating," she said, her eyes sparkling playfully. "But seriously, what do you think of the name?"

"I like it. Has a lot of meaning, like Uru, but sounds more adult. Prometheus gave us the gift of fire. The aliens gave us the gift of the Enigma Cube. And fire and the cube have a lot in common."

“Like what?” she said, testing him.

“First off, they’re both very hard to gift-wrap,” he said, trying to keep a straight face.

Kelly groaned.

“Come on. Gift-wrapping *fire*? That joke killed in Vegas.”

This time she couldn’t help but laugh. “Too bad we’re not in Vegas.”

“Seriously, though,” continued Boyd, “taming fire was the biggest game changer early humans could have ever made. It’s what allowed us to ascend to the top of the food chain. But if anything can come close to having an equal impact on our future, it’d be the Enigma Cube. And both fire and the cube are awesome, dangerous forces that can be used for both good and evil. To create a civilization, or burn one to the ground.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Kelly.

“But there’s a less . . . *pleasant* side to the story,” added Boyd. “Prometheus was punished for helping humanity by having his liver pecked out and eaten by an eagle.”

“Still cheating, I see,” said Kelly with a twinkle in her eye.

“And his liver would grow back every night,” added Boyd. “So the eagle could eat his liver again the next day. Forever.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is this,” said Boyd. “That eagle must have gotten really *fat*.”

Kelly burst into laughter. “We’ll just have to hope that the torture part of this metaphor never comes true. Although humanity would still be okay. Zeus tortured Prometheus, not humanity, and we kept his gift.”

Boyd shook his head. “Unfortunately, Zeus didn’t need to torture humanity. We’ve always been really good at doing that to ourselves.”

“Wow,” said Kelly. “Way to bring down the room, Justin. Anyway, I’ll put the name up for a vote the next time we’re all together. But moving on to our most important topic. I got your message that you’re planning a trip to the East Coast tomorrow. What’s that all about?”

“I’ll be flying out of Fairchild,” he told her, referring to the air

force base twelve miles southwest of Spokane. “Going to Pennsylvania. To pay a visit to the Haycock group.”

“To beg forgiveness for destroying their generator?”

“No, they’ve forgiven me. And they’ve built another one. I’m doing this for *you*. I know you’ve been dying to use their specialized equipment to get some readings on Otto’s version of the generator. I figured if I got the readings for you, you wouldn’t have to pause your recruiting efforts.”

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically. “Because ten hours a day of recruiting is so much fun.”

“At least you get to interact with scientific giants.”

“Yeah, if by *interact* you mean climbing up their rear-ends with a microscope.”

“I really hope you mean that *figuratively*,” said Boyd impishly. “Because having to do that, *literally,* would be *much* worse.”

Kelly laughed out loud. “Have I ever told you how much I love you?” she said.

“So I make a joke about you climbing up someone’s rear-end, which in some circles would be considered of questionable taste, and that’s when you decide you love me?”

“No. I love you all the time. But your sense of humor is a big reason why.”

“Not my Superman-like reflexes?”

“Those are nice in a fight, but a sense of humor is great 24/7. But honestly, Justin, I can’t even imagine life without you.” She shuddered. “I don’t even like to think about it. Which is why I do love your reflexes. Makes me confident you’ll stay alive.”

“I can’t imagine life without you, either,” he said softly. “Fortunately, I don’t plan on going anywhere, or letting you ever get away from me. Tomorrow will be the first day we’ve been apart for a long time. And even though I’ll be right back, I’m still not loving the idea.”

“Then why not cancel?” said Kelly hopefully. “The readings aren’t vital. And you have more important things to work on. China might get to a dark energy generator and unlock their cube before we can

stop them, remember? And you need to keep working on an ingenious way to locate their cube."

"I won't be stopping, believe me. I've been pulling my hair out for ten days now, ever since the colonel challenged me to step up my game. So maybe a change of pace will help. And I do my best thinking on a plane."

"But why chance Chinese Intelligence is monitoring Fairchild and will see you when you arrive there? Or chance that they know about the Haycock facility, and have a satellite trained on it?"

"Even if they do, they won't be looking for me. That's the beauty of it. They think we're dead. Which gives us a Golden Ticket." He shrugged. "There's about a one-in-a-million chance I'll be discovered. And even if I am, they know I'm enhanced. They know they'd lose their best people if they tried to take me down. And I'd destroy Otto's generator first, anyway, so they'd never get their hands on it."

Kelly still didn't look happy, but finally nodded. "And you really think you might figure out how to find China's cube during the flight?"

"Inspiration does tend to strike me at thirty thousand feet. But even if I never find it, even if they manage to unlock theirs, all isn't lost. We still have *ours*. And you and I know exactly what it can do, and how to control it. They'll have to grope around in the dark for weeks or months, so they don't accidentally do the wrong thing and destroy themselves. And there's a good chance we'll find it while they're testing it."

He raised his eyebrows. "Nuclear bombs at rest are hard to find. Nuclear bombs being tested—much easier."

"Even if we do find it after it's unlocked, it'll be too late."

"Not really. Our hope is that we can keep our cube safe within the Uru facility—the *Prometheus* facility," he corrected, "forever. But if they activate theirs, we'll have no choice but to deploy ours against them. Since we'll be able to control the cube a lot more expertly than they will, we'll win the battle."

"Yeah, that's exactly what we need, Justin. An epic battle with each side having a weapon that can destroy the world a hundred times

over."

Boyd smiled sheepishly. "So you're saying it would be better if I can figure this out before it gets to that point?"

Kelly smiled despite herself. "Just a little bit," she replied. "But, you know, only if it's convenient for you."

After several seconds of silence, she shot her husband a salacious look. "In the meanwhile," she said, "why don't I give you another demonstration of the old adage, 'Make love, not war.'"

"That's my favorite adage," said Boyd. "But as you know, there's one region of my anatomy that EHO scientists haven't enhanced. And that region's going to need a little bit more time to . . . come alive."

"Don't take *too* long," said Kelly with a grin. "And tell your EHO scientists that it's about time they fixed this horrible oversight."

21

Kelly had kissed her husband goodbye that morning as he left for the Haycock facility and had been on the phone ever since. So long, in fact, that Boyd had already completed the long flight to Pennsylvania, landing twenty minutes earlier.

She gathered herself and began yet another scheduled call, audio-only.

"What can I do for you, Dr. Richter?" said the voice of Van Mendoza, the foremost expert in the field of quantum electrodynamics in the world.

"I'm recruiting scientists," replied Kelly, unable to use her real name, but happy to be able to use the last name that had once belonged to her grandfather. "To contribute to the most classified, most consequential, scientific program in history."

"Thanks," he said immediately, "but I have no interest in working for the government."

"I can't blame you, Professor. But this isn't . . . quite . . . the government. And while I can't tell you specifics, I *can* tell you that when you hear what this is, you'll want to be a part of it. So much so that if you learn of it later, and aren't a part of it, you'll consider it the biggest mistake you ever made."

There was a long pause. "I was asked to take your call by colleagues whom I respect quite a lot, Dr. Richter. Which is why I'm still on the line. But you'll have to at least give me a hint, or I'm afraid I'll need to return my attention to other matters."

Kelly nodded to herself. She had played out a variation of this conversation dozens of times. "If we end up asking you to join us," she said, "you'd be part of the greatest collection of scientists ever assembled. Working on breakthrough technology that enables exquisite and effortless control of the fabric of spacetime itself."

"If this is your idea of a joke, Dr. Richter, I'm not amused. No

technology can—”

The connection ended abruptly. The first call Kelly had ever dropped from within the secluded safe house.

As she glanced at her cell phone to check the battery, six metal canisters burst through six windows in the house in concert, filling her ears with the unnerving sound of shattered glass, and causing her to nearly jump out of her skin. The heavy canisters landed with a thud on hardwood floors and carpets and erupted into clouds of rapidly expanding gas.

Kelly gasped and dropped the phone. But as the gas began to engulf her, like a heavy fog rolling in at incredible speed, she reacted as decisively as a trained commando. She quickly found a pocket of fresh air and sucked it in, and then rushed to the kitchen where she had left the *go-bag* that Boyd had prepared for her. It was a gray duffel filled with weaponry and first aid that he had insisted she keep nearby, matching his own.

She hastily unzipped the bag and reached inside, locating a small gas mask and hurriedly affixing it to her face as the gas rapidly diffused to fill every last corner of the room.

The gas was Zanamine 4. She was almost certain. The same knockout gas Shen Ning had used in Boyd’s rental car to try to incapacitate them. Which meant that this mask, the same type Boyd had affixed to her face in the Lexus, would be just as effective at keeping it from her lungs as it had been then.

She snatched up the duffle and made her way to the enormous bathroom in the master suite upstairs, finding navigating through the cloud of gas challenging, even though she had lived here for five weeks now. Just as she reached her destination she heard the sound of doors being kicked in and windows shattering below, as twelve heavily armed men crashed in all around the sprawling safe house wearing gas masks of their own.

Former marine sergeant Moses Borrego stationed himself in their great room as his men fanned out to conduct a quick, cursory check of each room in the six-thousand-square-foot home. Borrego had spent nine years soldiering in the Middle East for a Private Military

Contractor, before branching out and forming a PMC of his own, one with exceedingly loose moral standards.

He frowned deeply as reports came back indicating that his men had yet to stumble upon the unconscious body of the woman they were looking for, although they had found her cell phone on the floor, which had been brought to him for safekeeping.

“We’ll begin checking closets and bathrooms now,” said his second-in-command through Borrego’s comm.

“No, hold off on that,” said the sergeant. After he issued a few additional orders, six of the men remained on alert in each of the residence’s six bedrooms, while four others guarded all possible exits.

With this completed, Borrego checked a sensor and removed his mask. “I’m showing that the gas has cleared,” he broadcast on the general channel, and around the house, eleven other men removed their masks as well.

The sergeant looked up as a former special forces operative named Tyrone Lewis joined him, as ordered. He handed the beefy commando a black electronic device the size and shape of a can of soda, which could pick up IR signatures through walls, but only at point-blank range.

“Go room to room with this,” said Borrego. “Approach any closed closets or bathrooms quietly. Get close enough for the sensor to work, just in case she’s somehow conscious and armed. Let me know when she’s located.”

“We used enough gas to choke an army,” said Lewis. “How could she still be conscious?”

“Who knows? But since we haven’t found her in the likely places, we can’t underestimate her. If she was helpless, they wouldn’t have hired a dozen of us for this job, would they?”

Lewis still didn’t look convinced, but nodded and rushed off to do as he’d been told.

Three minutes later his whispered voice came through the comm in Borrego’s ear. “We found her, Sergeant. She’s in the master bathroom. And you were right. She’s vertical.”

“Hold your position and stay quiet. I’m coming up now.”

The sergeant bounded up the stairs two at a time until he reached the huge master suite. He approached the closed bathroom door and stood to the side. “Dr. Connolly!” he shouted. “We know you’re in there! If you have a gun, don’t shoot. There are a dozen armed men in your house, all wearing vests. You can’t win. Just surrender and you won’t be hurt.”

There was no reply.

“I’m coming in now.”

Kelly braced herself as the sergeant pulled the door open from the side and carefully stepped across the threshold, surveying the landscape with his gun pointing in front of him. His eyes widened at what he saw, and Kelly couldn’t blame him. The bathroom was spectacular—and as big as the average master *bedroom*.

She watched as he zeroed in on her almost immediately. She was crouched behind a marble vanity nine feet away, still wearing her gas mask, with the duffel bag on the floor beside her.

Kelly held an automatic pistol just above the vanity, raising her eyes just high enough to see over it while keeping the rest of her body protected. “That’s far enough!” she barked.

“Drop your gun and surrender,” said Borrego, as four other men joined him in the bathroom. “We won’t hurt you.”

“I’m afraid *you* need to surrender,” she said. “Because you idiots are screwed! You set off a silent alarm. But one that doesn’t alert cops. It alerts a colonel who can scramble fighter jets if he needs to. You’ve kicked a military hornet’s nest.”

Kelly noted that all five men now in the bathroom appeared to be American, and the leader was unmistakably so. Since none of them were wearing masks, she quickly removed her own and dropped it on the beige marble floor beside her.

“Nice try,” said Borrego, “but we’re very good at what we do. We found and disabled two different alarm systems before we entered.”

Kelly shook her head in disgust. “Those were the alarms you were *supposed* to find,” she said. “Turns out that my husband believes in redundancy. Did your master in Chinese Intelligence tell you who I am? Why I’m so important? Did he at least tell you that I have the

entire US military as a guardian angel?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Everything you just said is a lie. And we aren't working for Chinese Intelligence."

Kelly snorted derisively. "It's cute that you think that," she said. "But your Chinese masters have walked you into a trap. American military forces are already moving in. Snipers are already taking up positions outside. You can almost see them moving in your mind's eye, can't you? Take a single step out of this house and you're dead."

"Your bluffs are wearing thin. Even if there were allies of yours outside, we'd use you as a shield. No way they'd risk firing and getting you killed."

"Just the opposite. They'd rather kill me than let *you* have me. Ask your boss."

An all-too-familiar hologram blinked into existence inside the crowded master bath, seven feet away from where Kelly was crouching. "No need to ask me," boomed a disembodied male voice coming from the three-dimensional projection. The unmistakable voice of Commander Shen Ning. "I've been listening in the entire time."

The three-dimensional image looked like nothing more than a large silver soccer ball, hovering at head height. It was the same one that Shen had used in the woods of Pennsylvania. Or at least had used in their original timeline, before Osborne had triggered an explosion in the clearing and ensured that this future never happened.

"She's bluffing about the alarm, Sergeant," said the Chinese commander calmly.

"Am I?" said Kelly in contempt. "Then stick around, because we're about to find out."

"Come now, Dr. Connolly," said Shen. "Or is it Connolly-Boyd? Don't take me for a fool. You and the major faked your deaths so you'd be completely off the radar. So why would you think you'd need redundant alarms?"

"In case someone didn't get the memo about our tragic demise. Like you, for example."

"She's bluffing," said Shen again. "And stalling. Drag her to your

vans outside and bring her to where we agreed."

Kelly glared at the mercenary in command. "Your boss cowering behind the hologram insisted that I be taken alive, didn't he? Which gives me an advantage. You can't shoot me, but I can shoot you. The first two men who try to pull me out of here will take a bullet to the head."

Borrego cursed out loud. "There's a tranq gun in the lead van," he told one of his men. "Go get it. And hurry."

"That won't change anything," said Kelly, "I'll still kill at least one of you before you can hit me with a dart. So I have a better idea. Walk away, and I'll pay you double whatever your Chinese puppet-master is paying you. I have the resources to make that happen."

"They can't be bought," said Shen dismissively.

Kelly ignored the voice and stared deeply into the sergeant's eyes. "You have no idea what you've gotten into," she said. "Your only chance to get out alive is to take my offer. Trust me, you're in so far over your head that you might as well be at the bottom of an ocean. Step outside and you'll be killed by weapons you don't even know exist."

She paused for effect. "But just for the sake of argument, let's imagine you defy the incredible odds against you and get me away from here—which you won't. In that case, you'll have to deal with my husband, who's an enhanced commando. A supersoldier. If he were here right now, he'd wipe all of you out without working up a sweat. And no matter what happens to me, he won't rest until he hunts every last one of you down."

The merc that Borrego had sent outside rushed back into the bathroom and handed the sergeant a tranquilizer gun.

"She's putting on quite a performance," said the calm voice of Shen Ning. "But don't listen to her, Sergeant. As clever as she is, she's still just stalling. Hoping for a miracle."

Right on cue, the unmistakable sound of helicopters could be heard in the distance, which quickly grew to a roar as they closed in on the house from all sides.

"I guess my miracle just arrived," shouted Kelly, making sure she

could be heard over the din. “Right on schedule.”

The helicopters landed on the expansive grounds surrounding the house, and the moment the rotors came to a halt a male voice thundered from outside, amplified to ear-bursting levels by a powerful megaphone. “Surrender now!” demanded the voice. “If you do, you’re free to go. But if the woman inside is harmed in any way, none of you will get out of this alive. I promise.”

There was a short pause before the amplified voice returned. “You have exactly five minutes to consider my offer. After that the deal is off.”

Borrego looked stunned, as if at a loss to understand how a routine assignment had gone to hell so quickly.

“They’re lying to you, Sergeant,” said the Chinese commander hurriedly. “They’ll never let you live.”

“*They’re* lying to me?” said Borrego incredulously. “What about you? She wasn’t bluffing about her military friends. But *you* said she was full of shit.”

“I truly thought she was,” responded Shen. “I was wrong. But believe this, Sergeant, right now, I’m the only one who can get you out of this. And I will. But you have to do as I say. Secure the perimeter and tie her in the center of the house. Booby-trapped in such a way that she’ll die if they even think about breaching. I’ve already paid you half your fee, so you know you can trust me. And I’ll quadruple it to compensate you for these unexpected developments.”

“Money means nothing if we aren’t alive to spend it.”

“You will be, Sergeant,” insisted Shen. “She’s right about one other thing. Her importance can’t be overestimated. I’ll unblock all phones in a few minutes. They’ll notice and call in on her cell. When they do, I’ll tell them that if they arrange for a helicopter for you and your men, and promise safe passage, you’ll let her go, completely unharmed, in exactly twenty-four hours.”

Kelly continued to stare at the mercenary leader, and shook her head. “Your boss is lying again!” she said in disgust. “And you can’t do what he says. Given I’ve been right about everything else, isn’t it time you believe me when I tell you he’s with Chinese Intelligence? If he

wins, the entire world will pay the price."

"That's ridiculous," said the disembodied voice in perfect, unaccented English. "How could anyone think I'm from China?"

"Get off it, *Shen*," said Kelly, emphasizing his name but knowing not to bring up information she had gleaned from their encounters in another future. "You think I don't know *exactly* who you are? I was briefed on you, and your escape from our detention facility. The briefers mentioned that you speak perfect English. More eloquently than most Americans. And that you tend to be pathetic and cowardly. I heard that there was an explosion in a clearing in a Pennsylvania woods, but that you were miles away, making sure your own ass wasn't in harm's way. Like you're doing now. Putting the lives of these men at risk while you sip umbrella drinks in Beijing."

"So you only *heard* about an explosion in Pennsylvania," said Shen. "That's funny, because your people did a great job of convincing me that you were there in person."

Kelly nodded toward Sergeant Borrego. "Notice that he didn't deny he's with Chinese Intelligence," she said.

"Enough!" shouted Shen, finally losing his patience. "Shoot her with a tranquilizer dart! Now! Do it, or I'll leave you to fend for yourselves. And since you have no idea what this is about, you won't live another hour."

Borrego hesitated.

"Do it!" shouted Shen. "You have five seconds to act, or you're on your own. I can help you get out of this alive, and give you a huge payday. Or you can die where you are, because you chose to listen to a woman who is so desperate she'll say anything."

The sergeant glanced at the men with him in the room to read their body language and came to a quick decision. "Okay!" he said decisively. "We'll do it! But we want *six* times the original money."

"Done!" said Shen immediately.

Borrego nodded and turned to Kelly, still mostly shielded behind a marble vanity. "You *are* coming out of there," he said menacingly. "Now. You can try to kill one of us, but we have vests. And we'll be shooting darts your way."

The sergeant paused. “Or you can be smart and surrender,” he added. “And remain conscious. You have three seconds to decide.”

22

Justin Boyd was twenty minutes out from the Haycock facility when he retook manual control of his rental car, a blue Mercedes SUV. He pulled it off the road and onto an abandoned field and cut the engine.

“Putting the call through now, Justin,” said the anxious voice of Tom Osborne a few seconds later. “Audio and video both.”

Since the car was self-driving, Boyd could have taken the call without stopping, but wanted to eliminate any possible distractions.

“Hello, Major,” said an unmistakable voice. “This is Commander Shen Ning. Nice to finally meet. I thought we’d be meeting in a clearing in the woods of Pennsylvania a while back, but I guess that didn’t work out. Instead, I got to watch you die there.”

“Then you’d better check your eyesight, Shen. Because I couldn’t be healthier. And I feel like I already know you.” He paused. “Wait, that must have been some other psychopathic asshole in another life. Reminded me a lot of you, though.”

“Come on, Major, you can do better than that. Not the fierce wit that I hoped for.” As he spoke, a small but high-definition holographic image of a great room appeared in front of Boyd. It was the great room inside the home that he and Kelly had been using for the past five weeks, with a large silver soccer ball hovering inside.

“I trust that you can see the room clearly,” continued Shen. “And also my holographic alter ego.”

Boyd scowled. “Get on with it, Shen!” he said through clenched teeth

The video pulled back to reveal his wife, who was seated in the center of the room. She had been bound into immobility with rope, and zip-ties had been ratcheted tightly around her ankles and wrists,

along with one loosely encircling her neck. A small brick of C4 explosive was affixed to her torso, with five separate detonators held by five mercenaries standing a healthy distance away.

"As you can see," said the disembodied voice, "your wife is awake and unharmed. For now. But I can blow her into tiny pieces at any time."

"*You goddamned bastard!*" screamed the EHO major. "I'm going to tear you apart with my bare hands!"

"You're carrying a lot of rage, Major. It isn't good for you. Is that what you Americans call *toxic masculinity*?"

"I notice you're far away from any danger, Shen. No surprise there. But that won't be true forever. If you don't let her go, I promise I'll end your miserable little life if I have to destroy your entire Ministry of State Security to do it. Don't bet against me, Commander."

Shen issued a loud sigh. "I'm afraid your confidence is misplaced, Major. Maybe it's because you imagine bringing your Enigma Cube along with you to help. I don't know exactly what it can do, but I don't doubt it's all but unstoppable as a weapon. Too bad for you that this isn't going to happen.

"We now have multiple satellites watching your Uru facility, including one with perfect night vision. More importantly, our space-based laser is watching too. Anyone going near your Uru facility, or the scaffolding on the east side, will find themselves—how do I put it? —*bursting into flames*. I don't have personal experience, but it looks like that would be . . . *uncomfortable*."

"I won't need a cube, Shen. I'll hunt you down and crush you like the cockroach you are, with or without it."

"Odd that you're so obsessed with my death, Major. After all, the woman you love is rigged with explosives, and surrounded by trigger-happy mercenaries."

"What do you want?"

"I want *you*, Major. And the dark energy generator you have with you. One that I understand belonged to someone named Otto."

"How could you possibly know that?" said Boyd.

"I had a drone watch the woods just beyond your scaffolding. And

it led me to the second biggest surprise of my life. The first was when I watched footage a little over six weeks ago of Dr. Connolly carrying the immovable Enigma Cube out of your facility—with *ease*. And the second involves her again. This time being surprisingly more alive than she should have been. You too."

"Don't worry, we have plenty of surprises to spare."

"No doubt," said Shen. "Which is why I want you and your generator. Because after I spotted you, I had the drone follow you back to your car. And then had a satellite track your car as it returned to your home."

He paused. "I'm sure you can guess the rest. I arranged to have you bugged. You swept Uru for bugs, but not your own home. And little wonder, because you were so convinced that you were off the radar. So smug. How did you put it? Oh, right. You said your faked death gave you and your wife a *Golden Ticket*."

"How long were we surveilled?"

"Five days. More than enough time. Good to see the marriage is going strong. You two have more sex than porn stars. And congratulations on keeping your relationship so secret. We were listening in when you first visited Uru, and your acting skills were impressive. You must have been married at the time already, but pretended not to even *know* each other. Was that for Dr. Salazar's benefit?"

When there was no reply, he continued. "And I have to thank you both for having such informative discussions inside your home. It really meant a lot to me."

"Yeah, I'm sure it did. Listening in allowed you to take the coward's way out, as usual. You got to learn when I'd be gone, so you could wait until then to attack a helpless woman. A civilian. What's the matter, Shen, don't have the balls to go after someone who can defend himself?"

Shen laughed. "She didn't seem so helpless to me, Major. And I'm pretty sure that China's celebrated military strategist, Sun Tzu, never wrote that you should only go after your *strongest* enemy. That you should make a battle as *difficult* as possible for yourself. In fact, he

advocated for just the opposite. For exploiting an enemy's every weakness."

The Chinese commander paused. "In short, Major, you don't attack an enhanced commando by engaging him in a direct fight. You attack him by capturing the woman he loves."

"Why didn't you just shoot me with that laser of yours?"

"We don't want you dead, Major. Believe me, when we need to use it, we will. But nothing could be more effective against you than the capture of your wife."

"It doesn't matter what you try," said Boyd. "Because there's no way I'll do what you ask. Under any circumstances."

"We'll see, won't we. I *overheard* you tell your wife that you couldn't live without her. Is that true? Or was that just pillow talk? So you could keep her interested in sex until you were finally able to . . . rise to the occasion."

There was a long pause. "No comment, Major?" said Shen. "Well, I guess we'll just have to find out if you were being sincere. Because if you don't surrender within the next hour to a team I sent to Pennsylvania to collect you, she'll begin dying. Very slowly. A body part will be removed every ten minutes. And between you and me, Major, she's bound to eventually miss one or two."

Boyd screamed at the top of his lungs, a primal wail of agony and hatred that didn't stop for almost ten seconds.

Shen calmly waited him out. When there was silence again, he continued as if the outburst hadn't happened. "But you can make sure she avoids this unfortunate disfigurement and death, Major. Just surrender yourself. Simple as that. And surrender your dark energy generator, since we overheard you say that it could unlock our cube."

The Chinese commander paused. "By the way, how did you know we had a cube of our own?"

Boyd didn't reply.

"Not feeling chatty?" said Shen. "Don't worry, that will change."

"I won't surrender," insisted Boyd. "The stakes are too high. Do what you have to do," he added, anguish etched in every line on his face. "Just know that if you touch her, you've signed your own death

warrant."

"How heroic. Sacrificing your wife for the cause. But now that we've overheard that dark energy is the key to unlocking the cube, we'll expand our program even more. If you thought we were putting a lot of resources on it before, you haven't seen anything. We'll put every scientist in China on the project."

Shen paused for this to sink in. "So what will you gain by letting her die?" he said. "At most, you'll be delaying us by a few months."

"With stakes this high, a delay of a few months could mean everything."

"We really aren't going to wait even two months to make this happen, Major. I was hoping I wouldn't need to go any further to persuade you. But I guess I'll have to make a disclosure that I wanted to avoid. It doesn't really matter, since we have a drone in place above you preventing you from communicating with anyone but me."

"You really love to hear yourself talk, Shen. Are you going to tell me, or do I die of old age?"

"I have photos of every member of the Haycock team, and their families. I'd be happy to send them to you if you'd like. I have their names, addresses, and in many cases, schedules. So continue refusing to cooperate, and in an hour, your wife begins a slow death, and we go in and take the generator that Haycock developed. That site isn't nearly as protected as Uru. And once we have it, I promise you that we'll kill every member of the Haycock team, and their families, just so you know the full price of your refusal."

There was a long silence, as Shen allowed this to sink in.

"So what will it be, Major?" he continued finally. "Remain stubborn and let your wife die horribly? Let hundreds of Haycock scientists and family members be slaughtered? To what end? In a misguided effort to delay us from unlocking our cube by *a day or two*. Not looking so heroic now, are you?"

"So why not just steal the generator from Haycock in the first place?" asked Boyd. "Why go to the trouble of getting me?"

"Come now, Major, you know the answer as well as I do. Because you can operate the cube. Which is a nice bonus. Maybe you can even

prevent us from accidentally blowing up the world. But if you continue to say no, Kelly dies. Hundreds of other innocents die. And we'll still unlock our cube in a day or two, even without you. We'll just have to, how did you put it?—*grope around in the dark*—until we figure it out."

"Kiss my ass, Shen."

"I *still* haven't convinced you?" said the commander in disbelief. "How about this. We know you're enhanced. We suspect you're a one-man wrecking crew. So if we kill you right now with our laser and take Haycock's generator, there's no one to stop us. But if you come along for the ride, at least you'll be on the inside. Sure, we'll be properly respectful of your skills, but you'll at least have the *chance* of turning the tables. You'll get to see how resourceful you really are."

Boyd shook his head in disgust. "The weight of your arguments would be convincing, Shen, except for one problem. You're a lying, deceitful prick. We both know you'll kill Kelly anyway, even if I cooperate."

"I *won't,"* insisted the Chinese commander. "You have my word. We'll leave her in perfect health. You too, after you've helped us."

"You really must think I'm the most gullible man on Earth, Commander. If you were listening in last night, you heard that I'm willing to battle with you to get your cube. A war in which both sides will use the cube as a weapon. And you know that Kelly and I are the only ones from our side who know all of its tricks. So you can't afford to let us go."

"We aren't worried about your skills, or your cube. Because right now it's underground. And we plan to make sure that it stays there. We'll never stop monitoring your Uru site. If anyone tries to enter, they die, and we'll bomb the outside with so much explosive power that the entrance will be buried under a mountain of rubble and granite. So we can free you both, sure that you'll never touch your cube again. We might not be able to break in and get it for ourselves. But we can surely prevent *you* from getting it."

The video zoomed in on Kelly once again, until the hologram of her and her predicament seemed to fill the entire car. Shen left it there

for an extended period.

"She's running out of time, Major," he said finally. "I swear to you that if you cooperate you and your wife go free. And hundreds associated with your Haycock site avoid being massacred."

"*Okay!*" shouted Boyd, almost hysterically. "You win, goddamn it! I'll surrender myself and the generator to your people. But I'll need proof of life every step of the way! She gets a scratch and the deal is off."

"Of course," said Shen agreeably. "She'll be treated like royalty. Well, royalty wearing a brick of C4—but you get what I mean. Pull off at exit twenty-nine and my men will . . . join you. Go with them willingly, and your wife will be just fine. As will Haycock and its personnel. My men will also give you a phone to use to call your commanding officer. The man on site here who just patched me in. I need you to insist that he back off for twenty-four hours. That will give us the time we need for you and your generator to unlock our cube."

Boyd scowled but nodded his agreement. "You know, Shen," he said, "unlike you, I despise killing. I only do it if I'm saving many more lives than I take. But trust me, Commander, when I kill you—and I *will*—I'm going to enjoy the hell out of it."

"Exit twenty-nine, Major," repeated Shen. "Pull off and they'll find you. And don't even think of trying anything stupid."

23

The Airbus Super Puma executive helicopter cut through the air at a leisurely pace, flying calmly over the harsh desert landscape. It was painted light blue and white, with a whisper-quiet cabin filled with lacquered wood, full-grain Napa leather, and gold accents as decadent as any found in the finest limousines and yachts.

The enormous cabin could seat eighteen comfortably. Or, in this case, one American major, unconscious, chained and tied to a seat at the south end of the cabin so securely that a jackhammer couldn't dislodge him, five plainclothes soldiers with guns drawn at the north end, and one holographic image of Shen Ning in between, no longer needing to appear as an inanimate object.

"How long until arrival, Captain Sun?" said the holographic image, facing the man in the center of the Chinese contingent.

"Twenty-four minutes, Commander," replied Sun He.

"Good. Bind the prisoner's legs and ankles together more completely. I want him to be able to walk on his own power. But I want his freedom of movement so limited he's as slow as a snail."

Two of the men carried out these orders. When they had finished six minutes later, the holographic image inspected the work and nodded appreciatively. "Now unbind his arms from the seat and zip-tie his wrists. But give him enough play to use his hands as needed."

When this was done, he turned to Sun He once again. "Now revive him, Captain," he ordered. "We want him conscious when we land. And given how slowly he'll have to walk, land as close to the entrance as possible."

Sun issued the Mandarin equivalent of "Roger that," and filled a syringe with a clear chemical agent that would reverse the knockout drug that Boyd had been given. Without ceremony he walked the short distance to the prisoner and slammed the point of the syringe

through his pants and deep into his leg, depressing the plunger as he did so.

Sun retreated back to his seat and waited. Only seconds later, Justin Boyd awakened with a start, as if rocket fuel had been pumped into his veins.

Boyd's mind went from unconscious to alert almost immediately, and memories of surrendering to Shen's men in Pennsylvania came flooding back.

"Sage, are you still with me?" he said subvocally, making tiny, undetectable movements with the muscles of his mouth and throat, which were amplified by sensors and sent on to his AI, hidden under a bandage on his thigh.

"I'm here," replied the AI through a comm in his inner ear, which could not be overheard.

"Welcome back, Major," said a hologram of Shen Ning himself, who had dispensed with his oversized soccer ball alter ego. "We'll be landing soon. I haven't gagged you, but I will if you give me cause. And I expect your full continued cooperation."

"How long have I been out?" asked Boyd subvocally.

"Thirteen hours, twelve minutes," said Sage.

"How long have I been out?" he asked Shen, wondering if the man would tell the truth.

The Chinese commander shrugged. "Thirteen hours or so," he said.

"I need proof of life, Shen. Now!"

"Of course," said the commander with a smile. "I thought you'd never ask. Your military friends backed off as you said they would in Spokane, so we were able to make your wife more comfortable. She's been moved to your couch. She's still bound, but more loosely, so she can sit, lie down, sleep, eat, and watch television. And while she's ringed with explosives, they aren't attached to her body."

"Thank you for that," said Boyd sincerely.

Shen nodded. "I'm pulling her image into the helicopter now. She'll hear you, but won't be able to see you."

A close-up holographic image of Kelly appeared in the opulent

cabin, right next to the one of Shen. True to the commander's word, she looked healthy and relatively comfortable, now sitting upright on the gray couch in the middle of their L-shaped upholstered sectional, an open bottle of water in her hand.

Boyd closed his eyes in relief and blew out a long breath. "Kelly, thank God," he whispered.

"Justin?" she said in surprise. "Justin, what's happening? Where are you?"

Shen shook his head, warning Boyd not to answer. Since the Chinese commander could cut the connection whenever he wanted, it was best to comply.

"I can't tell you where I am, Kelly, but it doesn't matter. Just know that they've promised to keep you safe, and I'm working on a way to get you out of there."

"Tell me you aren't cooperating with them," she said in alarm. "Please! It doesn't matter what they do to me. The stakes are too high. Promise me!"

He glanced at Shen and shook his head in disgust. "I'm not cooperating," he said. "*I promise*."

"Then what's going on?"

Boyd hesitated. "I don't have time to elaborate," he said finally. "But everything will be okay. How are they treating you?"

"All things considered, relatively well."

"Great. I love you, Kelly. More than—"

The image vanished.

"I'm sure she got the message," said Shen. "And after spying on you, I have no doubt she was going to tell you how much she loved you in return. So are you ready to cooperate?"

"Yes. But I'll need proof of life every step of the way."

"I'd expect nothing less."

Boyd surveyed the world outside the windows, seeing nothing but barren, sloping desert, along with walls of imposing rocky cliffs far in the distance on either side.

Interesting. In an alternate future on Sun Island, Shen had first disclosed that China possessed a cube of its own. He had explained

that China had not only detected the American cube in Spokane, but another outside of North America, although he didn't specify its location. All he had said was that it was in a desolate area, and China had bought up the land around it under the guise of setting up a climate station.

Because of this, Boyd had guessed it resided in an icy environment, like the Arctic circle, perhaps. But judging from the barren desert that stretched out endlessly below him, his guess couldn't have been worse.

Minutes later their destination came into view, a utilitarian single-story structure next to a hangar. The words, "Chinese National Climate Center, Research Outpost N-56," had been painted in huge black letters on its flat roof, in both English and Mandarin.

The outpost reminded Boyd of images he had seen of the American black-site detention facility in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, the one from which Shen had escaped. An outpost of humanity within a sea of arid lifelessness.

Large steel tripods, solar panels, and an array of scientific equipment erupted from the scorched earth for hundreds of yards around the facility. Boyd guessed this was all legitimate climate science equipment, which was even collecting data to further sell the ruse.

The helicopter completed its approach to the facility and set down gently on the concrete landing pad nearest the entrance.

"Looks like you've arrived, Major," said Shen, sounding delighted. "We left your duffel bag and its impressive weaponry behind. Can't imagine why you had that with you on the civilian highways of Pennsylvania, but you won't need it here. And you'll be happy to know that Captain Sun did bring your dark energy generator along for the ride."

"Good," said Boyd. "The faster we can get finished, the faster Kelly goes free."

"Then our goals are aligned," said Shen. "We want to get started as soon as possible. As you might guess, the real facility is underground. I don't need to tell you that this cube could only be

lowered, not raised, and couldn't be moved from where we found it. Until now, right Major?"

Boyd nodded. "Until now," he repeated.

"Good. I've made sure you can only move at a crawl, so I'll take my leave. I'll pop up again when you're in place underground."

"I'll try hard not to miss you," said Boyd as the holographic image of the Chinese commander winked out of existence.

24

Boyd was ushered slowly through the subterranean facility and finally into a single, circular room, about the square footage of two basketball courts. The alien cube was sitting on the floor in the exact center of the room, covered by a thick steel box, about twice its size. The box could be automatically extended from a cavity in the floor nearby and lowered over the alien object to block its dazzling, otherworldly, and unsettling light when it wasn't being experimented upon.

Scientific stations were spaced at even intervals throughout the room—each containing expensive computers and high-tech equipment—and dozens of eighty-inch computer monitors hung down from the ceiling.

Eleven scientists in white lab coats were standing together to the cube's east, and fifteen additional military personnel had taken up posts all around, drawing their guns when Boyd entered, even though his legs were so constricted he was all but mummified.

Boyd assumed that the eleven scientists had been summoned here to witness a breakthrough, a reward for the endless hours they had spent beating their collective heads against the cube without a hint of success. Other than the ever-present hum of machinery, and the squeak of Boyd's shoes as he shuffled forward a few inches at a time, the room was quiet as a tomb.

When Boyd was twenty yards from the covered cube, the four soldiers who had escorted him from the helicopter peeled away, leaving only Captain Sun, six feet to his left, carrying a military rucksack. The four soldiers joined their comrades, so that there were now nineteen guns trained firmly on the prisoner, a shuffling penguin of a man. Despite appearing completely helpless, they weren't about to underestimate a seasoned commando with unknown enhancements.

Right on cue, the holographic image of Shen Ning appeared in

front of the American major, facing his direction, and floating backwards as Boyd moved forward, keeping a fixed distance between them.

The prisoner shook his head in disdain. “Do you ever go anywhere in person, Shen? Ever get your own hands dirty?”

The commander smiled. “Telepresence,” he said. “There’s nothing like it. Especially in this instance. If I were there in person, you’d be too busy fantasizing about killing me to remain focused. I’d be like a bloody steak waved in front of a hungry lion. Besides, this way I can remain in Beijing and be a part of any number of ops at the same time. I can be here, and seconds later, back in Spokane, Washington.”

“Where *is* here?” asked Boyd.

“You’re in the middle of a desert, Major,” said Shen with a smug grin. “Given your training, I’m surprised you didn’t pick up on that.”

“You should stick to being a psychopathic asshole,” said Boyd as he continued shuffling toward the center of the room. “Comedy isn’t your thing.”

Boyd wondered how many of the dozens of men and women listening in could speak English. He guessed virtually all of the scientists, since they needed to stay current with the literature, and many of the soldiers.

When the American was about seven yards from the cube, Shen called a halt and issued an order to the captain, who was still shadowing Boyd to the left. Sun opened the rucksack and carefully removed Otto’s generator.

The device was in the shape of a perfect stainless-steel pyramid, with a square base about six inches on a side. Tiny magnets of different polarities and tightly bound wires ran in intricate patterns across the outer faces of the pyramid. The complex insides remained hidden, but the Chinese weren’t about to try to reverse engineer the device until it had unlocked their cube.

“How is it activated?” asked Shen.

“Have the captain hold the base against his chest. Point the tip of the pyramid at the cube. Then pull back on the few inches of steel that converge on the tip. Like pulling the slide back on a gun. This upper

part will slide inside the pyramid and uncover a copper grate. The act of pulling it back activates the mechanism automatically."

"Is the beam dangerous?" asked Shen.

"What beam? You'll have no idea it's even on. But keep your eye on the cube. *It* will know."

"Thank you, Major. Take a seat on the floor, and I'll have Captain Sun do as you said."

Boyd could barely bend his knees, so sitting was problematic. He was forced to fall backwards onto his rear end, and then do a sit-up to come to an upright position, with his bound legs stretched out in front of him.

His restraints rendered him nearly impotent while standing, but he was even more impotent now. He doubted that he could even rise without help, making Shen's simple request that he sit an ingenious one, rendering him as helpless as a capsized turtle.

The stainless-steel box covering the cube slowly lifted and retracted into the floor, baring the cube in all its glory. As always, thick beams of light so pure they almost seemed liquid streamed from the cube's vertices, and its naked presence was every bit as blinding, awe-inspiring, and mesmerizing as it had ever been. It pulsed with unearthly power, like it contained the beating heart of an entire star.

All eyes in the room were now fixed on the captain, who carefully did as Boyd directed, pulling back on the pyramid to reveal the grating that the prisoner had said would be there. Boyd could tell that all eleven scientists in the room were holding their breath, having been assured that this generator would unlock the cube but not allowing themselves to believe it. Not when the cube had easily withstood the almost inconceivably vast energies they had thrown at it over the months.

All of the inhabitants of the room gasped in unison, scientists and soldiers alike, as the eternal beams of blindingly bright light streaking from the cube's corners ceased in an instant. The cubic cage, and the ever-changing, ever-spinning, geometric figures inside, were suddenly no more, replaced by a white glossy cube with all of its faces solid, and looking no more powerful than a paperweight.

Bedlam broke out in the room as everyone began speaking excitedly at the same time.

Shen screamed out a single word, which Sage translated as "Silence!" and the commotion subsided immediately.

"The cube requires one more transformation before it's fully active," said Boyd. "After that, it will stay active in all states but the one it was in originally."

"So tell us how we effect this final transformation, Major," said Shen, looking absolutely jubilant.

"Press all four vertices at the top of the cube at the same time—and keep pressing for a while. Simple as that. This will reveal the cube's controls."

The captain returned Otto's dark energy pyramid to its original configuration and placed it gently back inside his rucksack. He then approached the cube, took a deep breath, and did as Boyd had instructed.

A chorus of gasps erupted once again as fifteen hieroglyphs burst onto the cube's faces, seemingly on fire. Captain Sun jerked away from the cube as if it were made of lava.

"It looks scorching hot," said the American major, "but it's not. Whatever you do, though, *do not* touch any of the glyphs directly."

Boyd turned to face the ever-present hologram. "I can show you what the glyphs do, Commander. But not until I see Kelly again."

Shen sighed, but didn't argue. Kelly's holographic image appeared in the room seconds later, still bound loosely to their couch. This time, however, Shen cut off the reunion after only a few seconds.

"Satisfied?" he asked the prisoner.

Boyd nodded.

"Good. Then please continue with your lesson."

"I will. But you'll need to help me up. I have to demonstrate the controls myself. There are some subtleties involved that can't be described. Precise pressures and cadences are required."

"Why don't I believe you?" said the Chinese commander.

"I'm telling you the truth," lied Boyd. "Control is a learned skill, which takes considerable practice and experience. In a way, you have

to play the controls like you're a pianist. No amount of verbal instruction can help your captain sit down to a piano for the first time and play Brahms. But since you'll be recording my exact finger movements, you can deconstruct them at your leisure. Long after you've freed me and my wife."

Shen shook his holographic head. "I don't trust you, Major," he said bluntly. "I'm not letting you get anywhere near that thing. You could hit a glyph that kills us all, for all I know."

Boyd frowned. Shen Ning continued to prove himself exceedingly shrewd. They had tangled with him in another future on Sun Island, and he had outsmarted them. Kelly had pretended to succumb to threats against Boyd's life, agreeing to demonstrate how to operate the cube. But she had planned to turn the tables once she had the alien object in her hands.

But Shen had been prepared for that. Had planned for it.

His reasoning at the time had been airtight. If she demonstrated how to control the cube as he looked on from a remote location, he would win. But even if she used it to wipe out all life in the room, he would *still* win. Because in that case, she would have to control the cube to do it, on camera, teaching him valuable lessons about its operation.

Once they were topside, Shen learned more about the workings of the cube every time Kelly used it to fend off another attack, not caring how many of his own people were killed in the process.

Then, to top it off, he had been more than willing to sacrifice the entire island full of personnel in a self-inflicted nuclear attack to get the cube back.

But, apparently, he was unwilling to replicate this strategy here. Unleashing nuclear Armageddon on a man-made Chinese island in the middle of the South China Sea was one thing. Doing so on someone else's mainland was another.

"I understand your suspicions," said Boyd. "But Kelly's life is on the line. And you have nineteen guns trained on me. If I so much as blink—"

"Enough!" spat Shen. "This isn't up for debate. You aren't

touching the cube."

Boyd scowled. "Okay!" he said. "But I expected to give you a demonstration. So give me some time to figure out the best way to explain the controls."

"You have two minutes, Major," said the hovering image. "Not a second longer."

25

Kelly pretended to watch a science-fiction movie while anchored to her new home, a gray couch, but her mind was on far more pressing matters. Her husband had asked for a second proof of life just a few minutes earlier, which meant that the time to act was nearly at hand.

She closed her eyes. Let her captors think she had fallen asleep if they wanted.

Her eyes were shut for less than a minute when the Enigma AI's familiar telepathic voice interrupted her thoughts. *"Kelly, China's cube is now active,"* it reported, alerting her as she had requested.

Adrenaline surged through her body and her pulse quickened. Boyd had done it!

Incredible.

"Eeny, up the local gravity on each of my . . . guests. I want them all out cold, like they were hit by a gravity sledgehammer."

"Understood," said the voice of the AI in her mind as every hostile in the house was slammed to the ground as though they had been stomped on by an invisible mastodon. Once on the floor, Eeny quickly ratcheted the gravity ever higher, causing their skin to ripple as if they were fighter pilots experiencing severe G-forces, and within three seconds they were all out cold.

"Thank you!" Kelly thought at the alien AI, feeling a giddy relief to finally be rid of the swarm of armed mercenaries.

"Now, please crush my restraints into non-existence," she added. *"And the C-4 also. But make sure the gravity well around it is strong enough to contain an explosion, just in case it goes off."*

When this had been done, Kelly rose eagerly and stretched, rubbing life back into her body, which had been couch-ridden for far too long.

"Eeny," she thought at the alien AI as she began to move toward her kitchen, *"push the refrigerator/freezer out of its slot and float it horizontally over the quartz island, drawers-up."*

When she arrived at her destination the massive stainless-steel refrigeration unit, weighing hundreds of pounds, was already hovering over the enormous kitchen island, which Boyd often joked was as large as an *actual* island.

She entered the short corridor created by the absence of the heavy built-in appliance and opened a closet-sized compartment in the wall they had hidden there. The Enigma Cube was sitting innocently inside, beside two enormous duffel bags, stocked for just this occasion.

She brought the heavy bags back out into the kitchen, leaving the cube where it was, and ordered Eeny to return the stainless-steel appliance to its rightful nook, hiding the precious alien object once again.

One of the duffel bags was brown, and one yellow, but both had hardened sides all around, and measured four feet in length, two in width, and two in height, giving them an impressive carrying capacity. The wide-mouthed tops covering both had been completely removed, leaving nothing but lonely zipper tracks encircling their perimeters, and ensuring that nothing could block the bags' contents from . . . escaping.

The yellow duffel was filled entirely with thumb-sized drones, armed and ready, which Boyd had told her were called Slaughterbots, or Hunter Killers. There were eight hundred of these in total, and each was controlled by an independent computer and AI, with the hive's master controller tucked securely inside an outer pocket.

Kelly snatched up a small drawstring sack that was sitting on top of the stuffed brown duffel, and removed two tiny ear plugs from within, which she quickly put into place. Her comms, implanted recently, were almost certain to provide the protection she required, but Boyd had drummed into her psyche that she didn't get any extra points for taking chances, no matter how small.

She next removed a cutting-edge bulletproof vest from the top of the brown bag and put it on. It was as light as a normal shirt but more

impenetrable than Kevlar. She then made a careful visual inspection of the rest of the duffel's contents, ensuring everything was in place, ticking through a mental checklist in her head.

A specialty drone they had named Houdini was present and ready, as was a sonic generator that had also been pre-programmed. Four flashbang grenades were attached to smart drones. These grenades would create a wall of smoke and were bright and loud enough to temporarily blind and deafen an enemy.

The overstuffed bag also contained an exceptionally powerful electronic locator, able to capture and record GPS coordinates for any position instantly, and a prototype signal jammer. The jammer was even able to block the new signal technology out of China, which American scientists had only solved two weeks earlier, restoring parity.

Remarkably, each and every device in Kelly's arsenal contained its own electronic intelligence, limited though it might be in some cases, and had all been choreographed to act in a precise, timed sequence, which had been ironed out in an elaborate war gaming simulator.

Finally, there was nothing left to check. It was time to make history.

Kelly took a deep breath and donned her final piece of apparel, a pair of sophisticated electronic goggles, timed to become opaque and protect her eyes an instant before each of the flashbangs detonated.

"Are you ready, Eeny?" she thought at the alien AI.

"I'm ready whenever you are," it responded.

She removed a final item from a small zippered compartment on the outside of the yellow duffel, an electronic timer and trigger, which would set the entire cascade of events in motion. She hit two separate icons on the touchscreen surface of the small device, set it gently on top of the pile of HK drones, and watched it begin counting down from twenty-five seconds.

Kelly took a few cleansing breaths and gripped both heavy duffels by their straps, one on each side of her, and lifted them a few inches off the ground.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered to herself, waiting for the

timer to count down to three seconds.

Six. Five. Four . . .

“Now!” she thought at Eeny with all of her might, and braced herself for what was to come.

26

Justin Boyd's eyes were lowered as he pretended to think deeply about how best to transfer his knowledge of the controls to the Chinese.

"Your two minutes are up," said the hologram of Shen Ning.

"Okay, I'm ready," said the American major. "But before I begin, Commander, I'd like you to have your men lift me to my feet. Sitting on the floor like this is undignified."

"Undignified?" repeated Shen in disbelief. "You have to be kidding me. Request denied."

"Then how about a bathroom break?"

Shen was about to respond—his scowl making it clear what his response would be—when the burning glyphs on the cube suddenly disappeared, and the cube returned to its previous, all-white form.

"What happened?" demanded the Chinese commander.

"I forgot to tell you, if you don't touch any control for exactly three minutes and twenty-three seconds, it reverts back to this form."

"Why this exact length of time?"

"I have no idea," replied Boyd, not bothering to mention that the cube could easily be set so that this no longer occurred. "You'll have to ask the aliens."

"Captain Sun," said the Chinese commander in English, "please press on the cube's vertices again so the glyphs reappear."

"Won't work," lied Boyd. "You have to wait eight minutes and fifteen seconds before it will respond again."

The commander frowned. "If I didn't know better, Major," he said suspiciously, "I would think that you were stalling."

"Stalling?" said Boyd, putting on a confused, innocent expression. "Stalling for *what*?"

Kelly's stomach wrenched as the universe collapsed in on itself. Reality bent and sensory input she couldn't begin to interpret flooded her brain. She had experienced these same wild sensations before when she had traveled in time, but teleportation was mercifully brief.

She flashed back into three-dimensional existence a few feet away from the Chinese cube and struggled to regain her faculties, knowing she had but a few seconds to do so. She was dizzy, and still felt the trippy disorientation and cosmic awe she had experienced twice before, along with the severe mental shock brought about by traveling through a dimension that human minds weren't built to comprehend. Still, she found a way to shake it off, boosted by an ocean of adrenaline.

The world seemed to be moving in slow motion, allowing her to take in her surroundings in seconds as flashbang-carrying drones launched themselves from the open brown duffel to begin their orchestrated ballet. She was aware of the presence of the cube, along with numerous Chinese soldiers and scientists, and Justin Boyd on the floor, his legs bound like a shrink-wrapped toy. Boyd was already slamming his eyes shut and covering them with his forearms as they had planned.

Every Chinese national in the room had their mouth hanging open, stunned by Kelly's sudden appearance. Even so, two of the soldiers had the presence of mind to turn their guns in her direction, but too late, as the sonic generator delivered its ear-piercing payload, an acoustic blast that was shrill and penetrating enough to knock out anyone without proper protection.

All eleven Chinese scientists collapsed to the floor, along with almost half of the soldiers who weren't fortunate enough to be wearing protected comms. Before they even completed their fall, the first of the four drone-carried flashbang grenades detonated, followed by the other three in quick succession, blinding and deafening all soldiers still standing.

Kelly's goggles did a masterful job of protecting her eyes, but even earplugs and a set of the best protective comms ever made couldn't completely shield her from the deafening concussive blast.

Right on cue, the tiny HK drones streamed out of the open yellow duffel like a swarm of angry hornets, programmed to ignore Kelly and Boyd, but to strike at anything else that moved. The tiny quad-copter drones were basically AI-controlled bullets, able to travel over a hundred miles an hour, navigate around corners, and hunt down their prey for as long as it took. They would not be denied.

Typically programmed to blast themselves through enemy foreheads, these internationally outlawed weapons were an atrocity. In this case, though, the two Americans had insisted they be modified to deliver a potent tranquilizer injection instead, turning them from lethal guided missiles to vicious, lightning-quick mosquitoes.

Within seconds, individual HKs arrived at the necks of the few soldiers still standing in the room—who had yet to recover their eyesight—and injected them with a drug that would put them to sleep for half a day. The massive cloud of tiny drones quickly moved on from there, spreading out and eagerly searching for ways to attack the remaining personnel in all other rooms of the facility, finding access under doors, through vents, and even by piercing glass or wood doors, as necessary.

Less than ten seconds after Kelly had first teleported in, she and her husband were the only conscious beings left in the Chinese cube-room. Boyd's comms had protected him from the sonic and flashbang attacks, and while squeezing his eyes shut and covering them with his arms had ensured the flashbangs wouldn't blind him, he was still seeing stars.

Kelly removed her earplugs and goggles as the specialized Houdini drone found her husband and went to work freeing him from his many restraints. The drone was equipped with blades, bolt-cutters, lasers, a diamond saw, and even acid, and could identify and defeat all restraints known to the military with great speed and surgical precision, even if the prisoner who was bound by these restraints was moving at the time.

Teleportation required active cubes on both ends. So Boyd had been kind enough to help the Chinese activate theirs at a time and circumstances of his choosing. The operation had been designed to be

foolproof. Kelly's presence hadn't even been needed, as the two duffels could have been teleported in without her, and were fully capable of eliminating all hostiles, and freeing Boyd, all by themselves.

She and Boyd had decided that a fully automated operation was a must have. Time travel caused humans to black out, something they had learned the hard way. Even though Eeny had assured Kelly that teleportation wouldn't be as hard on her mind as time travel, and she would remain conscious, they weren't about to take chances.

Still, there was no way Kelly was going to pass up on the opportunity to teleport, and if something malfunctioned, if the Houdini drone somehow failed to free her husband, even though it had managed this multiple times in dress rehearsals, she needed to be there to do it herself.

So far, everything had worked to perfection. The electronic locator had done its job, and the jammer had also kicked in automatically, causing Shen's image to blink out of existence at the very start of the proceedings.

Kelly turned to the cube as the Houdini drone cut through Boyd's restraints. She touched several indentations on the cube's face, setting its weight at ten ounces, and then hit the lone glyph that activated its telepathic AI. Once the AI was activated, it remained forever accessible to the person who had activated it—assuming the cube accepted this person as well-meaning, using its own inscrutable criteria.

Kelly winced, afraid to find out if it would find her worthy of its attention. True, Eeny had done so already. But much had happened since then, and who knew what a cube might do? Eeny had refused to weigh in on the matter, which demonstrated once again that even a cube she had supposedly domesticated could be stubborn and unhelpful.

"Cube AI," she thought at it as pleasantly as she could, *"my name is Kelly. Despite the current situation, I abhor violence, and my intentions toward life and this planet are nothing but good. Please confirm this in your own way."*

She paused for just a moment. *"Are you willing to communicate with*

me?" she continued. *"And carry out orders that don't conflict with your . . . programming?"*

Kelly waited with bated breath. It wouldn't be the end of the world if the cube refused, since they could still control it manually, but it would be a bigger blow to her ego than she cared to admit.

"Hello, Kelly Connolly-Boyd," said the cube in her mind, its mental voice somehow distinct from Eeny's. *"The answer to your question is yes. I will follow all of your orders that I don't find . . . objectionable."*

"Thank you!" she responded in delight. *"I look forward to working with you."*

Kelly noted that Boyd was now free and rushed over to him, melting into his arms and sharing a triumphant kiss.

"Brilliantly done, Kelly!" he said to her excitedly when they parted. Not waiting for a response, he quickly changed gears, speaking out loud to his personal AI. "Sage, give us a progress report on the HKs."

"The hive's master computer indicates that the drones have yet to encounter a room they can't penetrate," said the AI through their comms. *"Ninety-eight hostiles have now been rendered unconscious. Most of the remaining drones continue to be engaged in a systematic search-and-destroy mission to find and inject the remainder of the personnel at this site. Eighteen of the HKs are protecting the entrances to this room, so you don't get any unwanted company. The master computer estimates that all personnel at this facility will be unconscious within seven minutes."*

"Let us know when that happens," he ordered his AI.

This said, Boyd turned to his wife. "It's going so well, I'm almost afraid to ask. Any luck getting through to the cube's AI?"

"*A lot* of luck," said Kelly triumphantly. She flashed an incandescent smile. "In fact, I'm thinking of changing my name to the *cube whisperer*."

"Outstanding!" said Boyd. "I'm glad it's perceptive enough to see what a wonderful, decent person you are. I was worried that I might have poisoned you," he added with a smile.

Despite his smile, Kelly could tell he had been concerned about the damage he had done to her soul. That he felt guilty about what

circumstances had forced them to face—and do.

"Any word yet from the colonel?" he asked.

Kelly removed a cell phone from her front pocket and glanced at the screen. "Yes. He got our coordinates from the locator and is sending a drone here now. He says he found one relatively close by, and it should arrive in forty minutes."

"Did he say where we are?"

She nodded. "In the country of Jordan. Fourteen miles west of the Dead Sea."

"The Middle East?" mused Boyd. "I'll be damned. No wonder he found a drone close by."

The two Americans began to engage in lively conversation, recounting their recent experiences, when Sage interrupted less than five minutes later. The AI indicated that two hundred eighty-seven personnel had been vanquished, and that the hive's master computer was confident that no more remained standing. Several hundred HKs had been assigned to monitor all entrances to the facility, and the Chinese cube room, just in case.

Still, they couldn't celebrate a total victory just yet. There was still one more phase of the plan yet to complete.

Boyd motioned to the signal blocker device and arched an eyebrow. "Ready to turn that off and have a little chat with our commander friend?"

"You mean the smug, ruthless psychopath who cares nothing about human life?"

"That's the one."

"Then I'm ready," said Kelly in contempt. "You might even say *eager*."

"Good," replied Boyd. "Let's get under the bastard's skin." He raised his eyebrows. "And give him plenty of rope to hang himself with."

27

Kelly watched Commander Shen Ning's holographic image reappear in the room, and she and Boyd waited patiently as he took a quick survey of the surroundings. Thirty-one of Shen's comrades, a mix of scientists and soldiers, were strewn about like human speed bumps. The remnants of Boyd's bonds were on the floor nearby, along with two massive but now empty duffel bags, four spent flashbang grenades, and a variety of drones, ranging in size from the Houdini drone, almost as large as a bicycle tire, to the small but ferocious HKs now patrolling the perimeter.

Kelly held out the white cube and waved it at the holographic image with a triumphant smirk.

"Seems that I've underestimated you," he said to the two Americans.

"Because you're a fool, Shen!" said Boyd in contempt. They had learned what made this man tick in a timeline that no longer existed, and these encounters had taught them that they needed to use his own savvy against him. "Since we couldn't find your cube, I thought I'd have you bring us to it."

"So why have you let my transmission through?" asked Shen. "Just to gloat?"

"Well, yeah," said Kelly with a broad smile. She nodded at the cube in her hand. "But also to let you know that we were, ah . . . borrowing something of yours."

"And we wanted to thank you for playing the role of a stooge," added Boyd.

Shen was largely unflappable, but Boyd could tell they were getting to him. For just a moment the commander displayed a flash of rage, but he recovered quickly.

"So you knew I had your house bugged?"

"We *counted* on it," said the major. "We let you discover we were still alive on purpose."

Shen shook his head. “I see you didn’t let my bugs inhibit you in the bedroom,” he said in disgust.

“Knowing you were listening was . . . disconcerting,” said Boyd. “But we managed to put it out of our minds. And it was important that you knew of my undying love for this woman.”

“Because you *wanted* me to go after her. Wanted me to use her as leverage.”

“I did,” said Boyd, who knew from Sun Island that Shen was inclined to use this tactic. “We wanted events to play out exactly as they did. So we worked what we wanted you to know into our conversation. We made sure you knew that our dark energy generator would unlock your cube. And that I would be traveling with it.”

The commander sighed. “Yes, I see it now. You also made it clear that if you were attacked, you’d destroy the generator immediately. So capturing Kelly to get to you would be my only viable option.”

“Very good, Shen,” said Boyd, as if he were speaking to a child. “Maybe you’re not quite as stupid as you appear.”

Their holographic guest ignored the insult. “You also went out of your way to feed me disinformation about how your cube was stored safely underground at the Uru site,” he continued. “And how you hoped to never have to move it.” He shook his head in disgust. “But it was already hidden inside your house, wasn’t it?”

“Why do you think that?” asked Kelly.

“Because I’m not the imbecile you pretend to take me for. When the signal was cut off here, I checked Spokane immediately. You killed all of my people there just as surely as you did the ones around you now.”

“They aren’t dead,” corrected Kelly. “They’re unconscious. None of your people at either location were killed.”

Shen shrugged, not appearing to care in the least. “I’ll be sure to mention that to the Noble Peace Prize committee when I submit your nomination,” he said. “The point is, your impressive escape from your home suggests that you were able to use the cube. The fact that you’re in *Jordan*—that you actually *teleported*—is proof of it. *Undeniable* proof.”

“You’re right, of course,” said Boyd. “Our military let your attack succeed. But made sure you couldn’t take Kelly out of our home, so she wouldn’t be separated from the cube. To better sell the ruse, they waited as long as possible before swooping in with helicopters.”

“Congratulations,” said Shen bitterly. “You fooled me. But only because no one could have imagined *teleportation*. Incredible,” he added in awe. “The cube is even more extraordinary than we thought. Is that how you faked your deaths? Teleportation?”

Shen didn’t get an answer, but the wheels continued to turn in his head. “So Kelly could have escaped at any time,” he continued, working through the logic of it. “But she waited. And not just until you were in place here. She waited until just after our cube was activated.”

He paused. “Which implies that this is a requirement. That both cubes on either side of a teleportation event must be active for teleportation to work.”

Shen’s eyes widened. “Which further implies that cubes must be *present* on both ends of the teleportation to anchor it.”

For the first time, the hint of a smile crossed his face. “Meaning you can’t teleport our cube out of there, can you? *You, yourselves,* can teleport between here and Spokane. But *it* can’t.”

Kelly looked troubled, but quickly transformed this expression into one of contempt. “Wrong again, Shen,” she said derisively. “I waited to escape for reasons entirely unrelated to the activation of your cube. Reasons I’m sure you’re too stupid to figure out. In just a few minutes, Justin and I will blink your cube out of here and you’ll never see it again. You can count on it.”

“So it looks like we now have two cubes,” said Boyd, “and you have none. Which means it’s game over, Shen. Have fun telling your superiors how you played right into our hands.”

“You may be winning the game,” said the Chinese commander, “but it’s far from over. You Americans have always been afraid to wield your power. Too worried about false morality and international opinion. And that will be even more true in this case. Because you’ve chosen to keep this secret, even from your own government. So you

may have both cubes, but you'll be tying your own hands behind your back. China won't be. So we'll see who ends up on top."

"You have the more ruthless government," said Boyd. "Congratulations. I'm sure you're very proud. We'll just have to continue to outsmart you, like we did today."

Boyd shot the holographic image a contemptuous smile. "So long, Commander Shen. Ten seconds from now, Kelly and I will be back in America with your cube. And there isn't a thing you can do to stop us. Thanks so much for playing the role of puppet in our little charade."

Saying this, Boyd reactivated the signal jammer, and Shen's image disappeared.

The two Americans analyzed the conversation for a few minutes and then Boyd checked the time. "The drone will be arriving any minute," he said. "So you should probably be going."

Kelly nodded.

"By the way," he added, "I was relieved that teleportation didn't knock you out. How bad is it?"

"It's disorienting, that's for sure. But it's still a hell of a lot better than time travel. You know what pilots say—any landing you can walk away from is a good one."

She issued telepathic commands to the new AI, and then gave her husband a quick peck on the lips. "See you soon," she said, and then, without further ceremony, promptly vanished.

Boyd stared at the empty space she had just inhabited with awe. "See you soon," he echoed.

28

Shen Ning issued a string of curses and barely stopped himself from shattering his coffee mug against the wall.

He had been played to perfection. Worse, the major had let him get to within centimeters of the finish line, had actually helped him unlock China's cube, only to crush both of his kneecaps before he could take the final step.

Even so, he wasn't beaten yet.

After his supposed coup of learning that the two Americans were still alive the president of China had been ecstatic. So much so that he had given Shen command authority almost equivalent to his own.

And it was now time to use it.

The Chinese commander ordered four satellites and the space-based laser to watch every inch of the perimeter around the fake climate research station in Jordan. The Starlance system had cost over ninety billion dollars, but he didn't doubt that it was about to prove itself worth every penny. Because he hadn't been fooled. His American adversaries might be able to teleport *themselves* out of Jordan, but they couldn't teleport the cube.

Kelly was convincing in her denial, but that meant nothing. She and the major had proven themselves brilliant actors, after all. They had fought him every step of the way, from the moment his mercs had entered their home. Boyd had been so convincing, in fact, that Shen had begun to fear that no argument would move him to cooperate, even the torture and death of his wife. The commander had actually been relieved when Boyd had finally given in, even though the man had only agreed to go where he had wanted to be all along.

But Shen would not be fooled again.

There were now almost fifty men watching the satellite feeds. And they'd continue watching for weeks if they had to. Because it was only

a matter of time before the American major emerged with the cube. And the moment Boyd stuck his head out, Shen would beat in his brains, as though he were playing a life-sized game of whack-a-mole.

"Commander," said his AI assistant Lin, "an American drone has been identified nearing the entrance to the facility."

Lin was tied into each of the satellites and all personnel under Shen's command, coordinating information and transmitting Shen's orders to satellite AIs and human intelligence agents alike.

"Outstanding!" said the commander. "Send the relevant footage to my monitor."

He studied the feed carefully, but didn't immediately spot the drone. After a few seconds he realized why. It made use of advanced adaptive camouflage, blending in more completely than any chameleon ever had. Adding to this, the drone was relatively modest in size, was traveling only as fast as a man could walk, and was only a foot off the ground.

If he hadn't tasked so many to monitor the area, the drone may well have made it through, unnoticed. He watched as it slowly made its way toward the entrance and flew inside, now out of sight of satellite surveillance.

Shen made sure the lasers were charged and ready to go, and continued watching with growing anticipation.

He didn't have to wait long. Less than five minutes later the drone exited, once again flying slowly and hugging the ground.

The commander had no doubt that Boyd had placed the cube inside the small aircraft. The two Americans had expected Shen to believe they had already teleported back to the States with their prize, giving him no reason to monitor the site from above. But even if he did, they would never expect him to put enough resources on this surveillance to catch a drone that could be made all but invisible.

But they had been sadly mistaken.

Shen allowed himself a smile, and had Lin order dozens of jet fighters to streak toward Jordan, preparing to wage war for the fallen cube if need be. The US had considerable forces in the region, but the laser satellite should more than even the scales.

“Starlance is charged and ready to go,” reported Lin.

Shen locked his eyes on the screen and the small getaway drone—which was about to have a tragic accident.

“Fire!” he ordered Lin. He watched in satisfaction as a mighty laser beam flashed on and off in the blink of an eye, and the drone erupted into fire and debris and fell to the desert floor. He had no doubt the cube would survive just fine, and hoped against hope that the major would exit the facility to heroically try to retrieve it.

“Commander Shen,” said the voice of his AI assistant, “I’m no longer receiving a signal from the Starlance satellite.”

“Reestablish a connection immediately!” he yelled.

A few seconds passed. “Unable to establish a connection, Commander. In fact, our sensors are now reading that this satellite is no longer in orbit.”

“Then where is it?” demanded Shen.

“Unknown,” replied Lin. “But further readings and analysis suggest that it is no longer even in space.”

Bile rose in Shen’s throat. “Any record of incoming missiles, asteroids, or any other astronomical phenomena that might account for its disappearance?”

“None, Commander. As near as the sensors can tell, one moment it was there, and the next it wasn’t.”

Shen couldn’t deny it any longer. He knew exactly what had happened.

The two Americans had played him yet again.

Shen Ning was a man who had always prided himself on his icy-calm unflappability. But as this undeniable realization hit home, his rage and frustration erupted like steam from a kettle, and he began screaming at the top of his lungs.

And this was a scream that would continue for a very long time.

29

Justin Boyd grinned in delight as his wife materialized near the Chinese cube, holding a bottle of champagne packed in a stainless-steel ice bucket and two chilled glasses.

She swayed for just a moment, looking a bit woozy, but quickly recovered.

"It worked, didn't it?" he said enthusiastically. "Shen took the bait."

"That's right," replied Kelly. "China's laser weapon is no more."

She nodded toward the champagne bucket in her arm and grinned. "What gave it away?" she added in amusement.

Kelly set the bucket and glasses on the ground and rose, studiously ignoring the dozens of unconscious personnel strewn all about. "I bought this a few days after you came up with the plan," she said. "I never doubted that you'd pull it off."

"First off, it wasn't just me. *We* pulled it off. With a lot of help from the colonel and the techs who prepared your goodie bag. And a lot of things could have gone wrong."

"Nah. The plan was brilliant, Justin. The colonel was right. He put pressure on you, and you responded like a champ. Or, you know, like a diamond."

"Desperate times, desperate measures," he said. "If it failed, we'd be dead, and China would have an active cube."

"And yet that didn't happen," said Kelly. "So there's a lot to toast. We found their cube, took it, and destroyed their shiny new laser weapon, all within a few hours, and all without killing a single person. That has to be some kind of record."

Boyd laughed. "Maybe, but after you've defeated dozens of Nazi guards to capture Adolf Hitler, it doesn't seem that special. I figured Shen would play his part and find the drone. I'm just relieved that

Eeny came through."

"Why? It assured me that if the laser was ever used again, it could pinpoint its location and destroy it."

"Well, yeah, but we both know that thing can be fickle. I wouldn't have been shocked if it changed its mind." He shook his head in wonder. "But you have to admire its range. It reached up to low Earth orbit and swatted a satellite to death like it was a fly. Tom must be very happy."

"Ecstatic," said Kelly. "If he didn't have to come up with a story for the secretary of defense to explain how we knocked out their laser satellite—without mentioning the cube—he'd be in heaven. As it is, his people have finished rounding up the mercenaries I knocked out, and he's on his way to Fairchild Air Force Base with the Enigma Cube. And now that we don't have to worry about lasers from space, he's sending a military helicopter to bring you to a nearby base, so we can get you and the Jordanian cube home. Your ride should be arriving shortly."

Boyd smiled. "Then we have just enough time to hit the champagne before it arrives."

"I was thinking of traveling back with you, Justin. You know, the old-fashioned, primitive way."

"You mean inside a painfully slow military jet that can only travel thousands of miles an hour?"

"Exactly," said Kelly with a grin. "I mean, anything that takes longer than a second to travel from here to Fairchild just isn't trying hard enough."

Boyd laughed. "Thanks," he said, "but I can't let you do that. I'll suffer through the flight on my own. It really will be supersonic, so it won't take more than three hours. And I'll know that you'll be waiting for me when I land."

"You really don't want the company?"

"I'd love the company. But you've been through a lot, Kelly. So relax in the deluxe accommodations at the spectacular Fairchild Spa and Resort, while I bring home the alien bacon in a boring jet."

She raised her eyebrows. "I don't know, Justin, if they'd let us

travel back in a cargo hold, I'm sure we'd find a way to make it less boring. Has it really only been eighty-six years since we last did that?"

"If only that were an option," said Boyd with a grin.

They had spent another ten minutes drinking champagne and celebrating when they got word that the colonel had arrived at Fairchild, and the helicopter coming for Boyd was just minutes away.

"Time to go," said Kelly. "See you on the base."

Boyd nodded. "Thanks for popping over with champagne. A great surprise, and a great touch."

"Any time," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Cube AI," she thought at their new acquisition. *"Please commence teleportation."*

"Before I send you off," it said, *"you should be aware that I have a message for you and Justin Boyd."*

"A message?" repeated Kelly in disbelief.

"Yes, but to be sure that I don't distract you, I can only deliver it when both of you are safely back on American soil."

"What?" thought Kelly. *"We're completely safe where we are. You can see that. So deliver it now."*

"I can't. It isn't my message. And I was given strict orders to wait until you were both on American soil."

"Strict orders," she thought at it in total dismay. *"Orders from whom?"*

"From a man named Jim Connolly," replied the alien AI. *"Or Otto Richter, if you prefer. A man I understand to be your grandfather."*

PART 5

“When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this—you haven’t.”

—Thomas Edison

30

Kelly was unable to rest as she waited for her husband to land at Fairchild Air Force Base. How could she possibly relax?

She hadn't gotten much sleep bound to a couch and surrounded by a dozen armed killers, but she was as wired as she had ever been. Not only had they accomplished their mission in spectacular fashion, she was counting the minutes until she could hear Otto's message.

How could this new cube even *have* a message from him?

It seemed preposterous. And what could that message possibly be?

While they waited for Justin, she met with Tom Osborne and Harry Salazar to keep her mind from the cube's stunning revelation, and to discuss next steps. They would still be using the Uru facility—now renamed the Prometheus facility—but would enter through a nine-mile-long tunnel, whose construction Osborne had overseen. The mouth of this new tunnel was inside a large warehouse, seven miles from the original factory entrance that led to the subterranean facility from the other side. Once they entered the warehouse, high-speed shuttles would get them to their destination in just under fifteen minutes.

Osborne had seen to it that Kelly and Boyd had new cars, not known to Chinese intelligence. They would also never go near their safe house again, living temporarily inside the Prometheus facility until a new residence could be found and safeguarded. Since they had outed themselves as being alive and well, they would now wear breakthrough technology in the form of lapel pins, which would send a slightly distorted image of their faces to all prying cameras, throwing off facial recognition algorithms.

Osborne hoped that the Chinese would never guess they'd have the audacity to still make use of the Spokane facility, but was convinced it wouldn't matter. The new entrance was off their radar, so they wouldn't know the facility was in use, or who was coming and going. And now that American scientists had cracked China's new

signaling tech, they could easily scan for bugs inside and around the facility, and anywhere near their route.

Given that the Prometheus team now had both cubes, China would not attack the facility. Not only would such an attack fail, but China would then be at the mercy of the Prometheus team and their cubes, and any retaliation they might choose to dole out.

Meanwhile, the team would relocate to a new site much sooner than originally planned.

At long last, Boyd landed, and he and the cube were whisked to the nearest conference room, a barebones, utilitarian affair, with his wife, the ex-director of Uru, and his commanding officer present.

Kelly and her husband sat on one side of the table, and Harry Salazar and Tom Osborne on the other. The three men waited patiently while Kelly finished a long telepathic conversation with the new alien AI.

"Sorry about that," said Kelly when she had finished. "But good news. This new cube is being more cooperative than Eeny usually is. No offense, Eeny," she added with a smile, since their original cube was also in the conference room with them, resting on the table beside the newcomer.

"Cooperative in what way?" asked the colonel.

"It's agreed to play Otto's message—Jim Connolly's message," she amended, "for all of us. Eeny will rarely communicate with anyone but me, even if I order it."

Kelly paused. "So here's how this will work. I'm going to turn off the lights, making it as dark as a cave in here. The cube will telepathically project my grandfather's message into each of our minds. Apparently . . . *Jim* . . . will be sitting at a desk. It will appear to each of us that he and the desk are in this room, at the head of the table. In our minds, the room will be well lighted. We'll be able to see and hear my grandfather—and each other. You won't even realize that this is only happening inside your own head. If you want to interrupt, or ask a question, the cube will automatically pause the playback. You'll be using telepathy, but the rest of us will see you move your mouth and speak as always, and you will perceive this to be the case

also."

"Of course," said Boyd wryly. "You act as if none of us have ever participated in a telepathic séance run by an alien AI before."

Kelly smiled despite herself. "Is everyone ready?"

All three men nodded.

"Good," she said. "Let's do this thing."

31

Jim Connolly flashed into existence at the head of the conference table, sitting at a small oak desk of his own, his posture relaxed. The dark room now seemed well lighted, as promised, and their guest appeared to be even more real, more present with them, than even the nearly perfect holograms that had recently become commonplace.

For Kelly, his virtual presence was uplifting and heartbreaking both. They had been with him less than two months earlier, but it seemed far longer, and the man before them had aged decades. She missed the eighteen-year-old Otto, and hoped this would somehow be the chance to see him once again.

Even so, her heart swelled at being able to witness the man he had become, the man she recognized from family pictures, who looked to be around the age he had been near the time of his tragic passing. His scrawny body had filled out, and he looked trim and fit. His blondish boyhood head of hair hadn't thinned, but it had darkened. His green eyes, which matched her own, blazed with a dazzling intensity, as though the fire of his dizzying intellect could not be contained.

The elder Connolly smiled affably. "Hello to my dearest Kelly," he began, his voice exactly as it was at the age of eighteen, "and to her wonderful husband, Justin. I can't tell you how much I missed you both these many years. My love and admiration for you has never diminished.

"I know that for you it will only have been a short while since we were together. But for me, it has now been twenty-eight long years. As I deliver this message, it's 1971, and I'm forty-six, finally older than my granddaughter, if only by sixteen years."

The eyes of Kelly and Justin misted as they watched, this heartbreaking visit a reminder of how much they had come to love this man, and how very real he seemed to be.

"I wish I could see you and Justin there, together, receiving this message. But I take comfort in knowing that you're ecstatically happy

together."

He paused and smiled. "So how do I even know that you're both out there listening? Easy. Because you vowed that you would hunt down China's cube and bring it back to America. And I can't even *imagine* you failing. I've seen you in action, and together you make a team that is truly unstoppable."

Connolly shifted in his seat. "But let me get to the message I'm here to deliver," he said. "After you and Justin left, Kelly, I set several long-range goals for myself. First and foremost among these was to go on to live the wonderful life my journal had indicated I would have, and that you had confirmed from family lore. Meeting your grandmother, amassing millions in a relatively unassuming way, and having a son who would one day go on to have you as a daughter.

"I also vowed to do nothing that could change any of the future laid out in my journal, or that you had conveyed to me. I couldn't risk that you wouldn't be born. And your future is tied to my past, and possibly the future of fascism. Since things ended up working out so well for the world, I refused to risk any changes. But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

"I met your grandmother, right on schedule, and it truly was love at first sight. While no marriage is perfect, ours has been as storybook as any marriage ever, even better than my own journal had led me to expect. I believe the same will be true for you and Justin.

"But I digress," he said. "I should tell you about the other goals I set for myself. As you might guess, finding a way not to die of a heart condition at the tender age of forty-six was *very* high on the list. And I wanted to make it to your time. To see you and Justin again, and also to access the miraculous science and technology of your day for my own further studies."

He paused, as though remembering. "So for many years, I worked on both time travel and the biology of the cardiovascular system. I dreamed of curing myself, faking the death that you remember—so as not to change the historical record—and then joining you in 2027. Your grandmother would be a willing accomplice to my faked death. We were long resigned to not being together after 1971. She needed to

live out the history you knew, and this history didn't include me."

"Wait a minute," said Osborne in confusion. True to the alien AI's word, Jim Connolly froze in place as if he were a living statue. "The Enigma Cube can facilitate time travel. So why would he need to work on this on his own?"

"Because he refused to use the cube," said Kelly. "His journal says he buried it in 1943, and that it was never active again after that year. Eeny confirmed this on Sun Island in the alternate timeline Justin and I lived through. When I wanted to travel into the past, it made it clear that prior to my birth, 1943 was the most recent year it had been active."

"You have to admire his resolve," said the colonel. "He vowed not to use it, and wouldn't even break that vow to save his own life."

"This is true," said Kelly, "but even if he *could* access the cube, it wouldn't have done him any good. Just as a reminder, Eeny is programmed to enforce very strict time travel rules, which we believe are somewhat arbitrary. Rules imposed by the aliens, rather than being prohibited by the laws of nature. The cube won't allow two versions of someone to exist at the same time. And will only let someone travel to a point in the future where at least one version of themselves had managed to exist."

"The bottom line," added Boyd, in case Kelly's point wasn't crystal clear, "is that since there was never a version of Otto alive in 2027—of Jim Connolly—the cube would have refused to send him there."

"I see," said Osborne. "But if he could solve time travel for *himself*, he might be able to overcome these arbitrary restrictions."

Kelly nodded. "That's right."

When the alien AI sensed that the interruption was over, Connolly sprang to life once again. "To make a long story short," he said, continuing where he had left off, "I failed on both fronts. Time travel is the most challenging problem I've ever encountered, and I wasn't able to make much progress.

"And I came up well short in solving my heart issues also. I learned when I hit my forties that I had a complex mixture of cardiovascular abnormalities. A thorny mess, not easily fixed. While I

was able to achieve any number of breakthroughs in the field of physics—with the notable exception of time travel—I found medicine and biology largely resistant to my efforts.

"In physics I could use math. I could do thought experiments. I could come to solutions on purely theoretical grounds. Not so with biology. The tools I need don't yet exist. If I had a map of the entire human genome, and the ability to modify DNA at the molecular level, I'd be able to make real progress. I suspect you'll have both of these tools in 2027, but we don't have them now.

"And drug discovery in my day is a hit-or-miss proposition, requiring more luck than brilliance. It's all about brute force screening of millions of compounds, looking for one that just happens to have the right effect on the body. Multinational pharmaceutical companies spend many billions of dollars a year on research, and often have very little to show for it."

Connolly sighed. "Fortunately, there was another idea I'd been pursuing in parallel," he added. "Suspended animation. If I could find a way to put myself into stasis, I could fake my death and remain a corpsicle, as it were, until I reached 2027. Assuming medicine had advanced enough to save me, you and Justin could revive me, Kelly, and voila, I would accomplish the same end as time travel using different means. I'd be alive, I'd remain at the physiological age of forty-six, and we could have the reunion I've long dreamed of."

Connolly frowned and shook his head. "But once again, although I made substantial progress, I couldn't perfect the stasis field. I could put myself into stasis, all right, I just couldn't get myself back out again."

He flashed a self-deprecating grin. "Maybe it's just me, but I have to believe that being able to actually *return* to consciousness is an important part of the equation. Basically, I could jump out of a plane and perform beautiful mid-air acrobatics—I just didn't have a parachute for the landing.

"In the end, the best I could do was create a stasis field inside a closed chamber that would freeze me in a state exceedingly close to that of death. And, as far as I could tell, maintain me in this state for

hundreds of years if need be, with no real aging taking place. And I could revive myself just fine in the early going. But this was no longer true after about three months.

"I did numerous experiments on animals. And, for a period of two weeks, on myself. Revival became increasingly difficult the longer the stasis field had been in place. If I was in stasis for just a few days, revival was almost immediate. For a week, revival took much longer, and was more problematic. It fit a mathematical curve precisely. The math made it clear that beyond day ninety-two, revival became impossible. I could easily remain in a near-death stasis until 2027, but I could never be revived. I'd be Snow White with no prince to break the spell."

Jim Connolly sighed. "I know that you and Justin are well aware of how stubborn I can be. I was tempted to just give up and accept my fate. But the wheels in my head kept turning. So I came up with a plan C. Or maybe D," he added with a smile. "But who's counting? Or, more accurately, who's alphabetizing?"

"I'm really starting to like this guy," said the colonel.

After a brief, cube-induced pause to allow for the colonel's interruption, Connolly resumed. "I couldn't make use of the cube I had buried in the woods of Spokane without changing your history. But there was another one on Earth. The one that China had found in your day. If I could locate this, maybe I could come up with another plan. And this cube wasn't on your historical radar. So as long as I returned it to where it was, for the Chinese to find, I could activate it and use it freely."

He raised his eyebrows. "Since the very cube in question is delivering my message to you now, it's obvious I succeeded. It was a fairly straightforward task. You had told me that China had located both cubes on Earth using a dark energy detector. So after sixteen months of work, I was able to develop one of these for myself."

"Are you kidding?" said Salazar in awe, freezing Jim Connolly yet again. "This guy invents a dark energy generator with the primitive technology of 1943. And then a *detector* with the still-primitive technology of 1971. He's like a Richard Feynman level genius times

ten."

When there was no further comment, the AI continued its playback.

"As you know," said Connolly, "I found the cube in the Jordanian desert. The same place you must have visited to wrest it from China's hands. It was about three feet under the ground. So I unburied it, activated it, and brought it home. This was almost two years ago. And sure enough it was willing to speak with me, telepathically, just like Eeny had before it. I named it *Trek*, by the way, in case you want to continue calling it that.

"Just as an aside," he continued, "the name comes from a television show called *Star Trek*. A show that I'm sure you've never heard of. The show struggled, and never found much of an audience, but I really enjoyed it. Science was king, and it had a hopeful message about mankind. It was finally canceled without fanfare in 1969, just before I found the cube, and I'm certain that fifty-six years from now, not even television historians will remember that it ever existed."

Salazar was now grinning from ear to ear.

"Really, Harry?" said Kelly, freezing the presentation. "You're happy because he got this prediction so wrong, aren't you?"

"Just a little," replied Salazar in amusement. "It does make him seem more . . . human. Right?"

"Believe me," said Boyd, "he's only superman when it comes to science. We spent a lot of time with him, and his knowledge of history was pretty weak. And he was only average when it came to predicting the future." The major arched an eyebrow. "Besides," he added, "when it comes to guessing what might hit it big in pop culture, I'd say that genius is a *disadvantage*."

Kelly laughed as the AI unfroze her grandfather once more.

"After considerable consultation with Trek," continued Connolly, "I've come up with a plan. A plan impossibly convoluted and absurd. But don't blame me. I didn't invent the rules of time travel, the aliens did. I'm just the one who finally found a way around them."

The figure paused. "Here's the gist of it," he said. "It turns out that the last time the Jordanian cube was active was in the days of the

Roman Empire thousands of years ago. For much of this time, Jordan was part of that empire. Trek is willing to send me back there, because I wouldn't be breaking any of its rules. It would be active on both ends, a critical requirement, and only one version of me would be alive at the time.

"I'm sure that you're wondering how going into the distant past can help me," continued Connolly. "The medicine there will be primitive. Won't I just die *there* instead of dying here? That would be true if I planned to stay. But my goal will be to leave as soon as I regain consciousness, using this period simply as a stepping stone and nothing more. And by staying so briefly, there's virtually no chance I'll change the future in any appreciable way.

"Basically, my goal will be to catapult myself forward to 2027 the same way you and Justin did. In your case, you were able to get your Colonel Osborne to eliminate the versions of you in the future, allowing you to replace them. I've figured out a way to do the same, but one that's even more complicated.

"You see, I learned that Trek is programmed to consider a human deceased if they are dead for just over two minutes and fifty-seven seconds. A figure I rounded up to three minutes. Which, *finally*, opens up a loophole I can work with. Because we all know that a human can be revived after being 'dead' for this length of time. My chamber can't revive someone in stasis for more than ninety-two days, as I've said. But it *can* dial them down to full clinical death, and then bring them back to stasis—which itself is a level just a hair above death. And prior to ninety-two days, it can then return them to full wakefulness, also.

"So here's the plan I intend to carry out within the next few days, in all of its convoluted glory. I've already faked my death the way you remember it, with your grandmother's help. And Trek has agreed to do its part. Soon, hidden away inside a tomb of my own construction —or maybe underground laboratory is the better term—I will climb into a stasis chamber and become just barely alive. Your grandmother will then dial me down further, to actual, clinical death, where I will remain for precisely three minutes.

“At that time, Trek will send me and the stasis chamber forty-nine seconds into the past. To a time when the original me has been clinically dead for two minutes and eleven seconds.”

He paused to let this sink in.

“Now there will be two Jim Connollys and two stasis chambers in the . . . lab,” he said. “Why won’t they occupy the same space? Because when you’re sent through time, as you know, you land about five feet from the cube in the past. You and Justin began your time travel journey in the South China Sea, but finished it next to the cube in Canada. So all I have to do is make sure that the cube is fifteen feet away from the stasis chamber when I enter it. When I go back in time, the duplicate of me will appear just five feet away from the cube, giving the two stasis chambers ten feet of separation.

“And why will the AI even allow this?” continued Connolly. “Simple. Because there will never be two versions of me alive in the same slice of time, so I won’t violate its rules. I’ll have been dead for Trek’s required three minutes when it sends me back the forty-nine seconds. As far as Trek’s arbitrary rules are concerned, it’s simply sending a *corpse* into the past.

“So two of me *won’t* be alive at the same time. There will be a version of me who’s been clinically dead for two minutes and eleven seconds, which Trek will still consider to be alive. And a version of me dead for three minutes, which it won’t.”

He paused once again, well aware that this required some time to digest.

“The moment I arrive forty-nine seconds in the past, the stasis chamber will begin to revive me. After being in stasis for such a short period, I can be revived to full wakefulness in only fifty-four seconds.”

“Brilliant!” mouthed Kelly under her breath, having jumped ahead and figured out the rest. Her grandfather’s audacity was stunning.

“By the time I regain consciousness,” continued Connolly, “the *other* version of me will now have gone just beyond the three-minute mark of clinical death. So one of us will still be deemed alive, and one dead, according to the cube’s programmed rules. We’ll just have swapped statuses. Again, at no point will two of me ever be ‘alive’ at

the same time.

"The moment I'm conscious, the AI will send me back to the Roman Empire. But this time only me, not the stasis chamber.

"Trek refuses to tell me exactly when or where I'll be landing. This is frustrating, but given how much it's been cooperating otherwise, I can't complain. The point is, once this version of me is in the distant past, the other version can come back to life without worry that there are two of us sharing the same time. But the 1971 version won't be fully revived, only returned to stasis. And while this is very near death, Trek will still deem me to be alive."

He paused to catch his breath and let his audience digest what he had said. "That's the first part of the plan," he continued. "For the second part, after one of the two versions of me is sent to Ancient Rome, the second version will remain in stasis, hidden and protected, until 2027."

Kelly was struck by just how masterful his strategy really was. Her grandfather couldn't just travel into the past directly, because if he did, there would be no *him* left to live on into the future. So he had come up with a way to make a duplicate of himself, sending one version back into the distant past, and one onward to the future in a stasis chamber, so he could make it to 2027 without aging, and without his heart condition killing him.

Connolly grinned. "I feel like I should say, *ta-da,* like a magician pulling off a dazzling trick. I'm sure the rest is obvious by now, if it wasn't before. Your grandmother will fly back to Jordan, return the cube to where it was, for the Chinese to find many years later, and set it to its inactive form."

His eyes now misted, and his words became heavy with emotion. "I can't tell you how much I'll miss your grandmother, Kelly, and your father. He's only fifteen now, a horrible time for me to leave him, but at least I know from you that he grows into a wonderful husband and father. The worst part is that I can't tell him any of this, to ensure the future plays out as it did."

Connolly wiped his eyes and took a few seconds to compose himself again. "Fifty-six years from when I'm delivering this message,"

he continued, “I have no doubt that you and Justin will manage to find the cube, activate it, take it from the Chinese, and bring it back to America. Which you have just done, or you wouldn’t be hearing me now. As we know, the version of Trek in the past can send me from the Roman Empire to a point in the future in which I’ve been alive. And I’ll still be alive in stasis in 2027, despite this ‘life’ being lived in suspended animation, and not being fully recoverable.”

Connolly sighed. “So here is what I’m asking you to do. Confirm that the medicine of your day can save my life. If so, go to the lab in which the stasis chamber is buried and dial me down to full-on dead.

“The instant the duplicate me awakens in the Roman Empire, I’ll have Trek send me forward to 2027. Tom Osborne killed the 2027 versions of you to make way for your arrival from the past. You’ll be doing the same for me. But in this case, you won’t really be killing 2027 Jim Connolly, since he’ll be as good as dead anyway in his permanent state of suspended animation. All you’ll be doing is finishing off a poisoned Snow White, once and for all, so that a fully awake duplicate can take her place.”

Connolly remained silent for an extended period, allowing his audience time to contemplate the full scope of what he hoped to do.

“Is this the most absurd plan ever conceived?” he resumed with a wry smile. “Probably. Is it ridiculous and overly complicated? Absolutely. But it should work. I checked all of it with Trek. The AI assures me that my logic is sound, and that it will cooperate. Despite being aware that I’m doing nothing but exploiting loopholes to circumvent its rules.”

He smiled. “I think the aliens like making things tricky for us,” he added as an aside. “Perhaps our struggles to extricate ourselves from ever-thornier thickets amuses or entertains them. But, regardless, I’d like to think that we’ll soon be able to have the reunion that I’ve long dreamed of.”

Connolly went on to disclose the location of his lab-turned-mausoleum, and informed them that Trek could supply exhaustive medical records highlighting the full gamut of his cardiovascular issues.

Assuming their medicine could cure him, they would dial him to full death for three minutes. If his living duplicate didn't arrive from the past at the exact moment of his official death, something must have gone wrong. They would have to assume his duplicate had been killed in ancient times.

In that case, he asked that they return him to stasis, in the hope that scientists could improve upon his work, and one day discover how to revive him to full consciousness. To this end, he had supplied Trek with the plans and science behind his stasis chamber.

In fact, along with his medical records and stasis chamber blueprints, Trek possessed information on any number of scientific breakthroughs that Jim Connolly had made, some of them revolutionary. Since Kelly and his journal had indicated that these discoveries had never been disclosed, he had kept them to himself.

But in 2027, this was no longer necessary. Trek would share these records with them, and Connolly had also placed a hard copy inside his laboratory crypt.

With this, the telepathic playback of Jim Connolly's message from 1971 ended, and Kelly turned the lights on once again.

No one spoke for almost a full minute. It was quite a lot to take in.

"That was *extraordinary*," said Osborne finally. "An absolute tour-de-force. Talk about genius. Talk about thinking through all the angles."

"No doubt," agreed Salazar. "I'd give anything to get this guy on our team. The sky would be the limit. Look at the breakthroughs he's already made, far ahead of their time. Now imagine what he could achieve with access to modern scientific theories, computers, and technology."

Kelly nodded. "It would be amazing," she said.

"Then let's make it happen," said Boyd. "I can't wait to get him back. He may be older than me now, but he's the same Otto I remember. Same voice, same humor, and same brilliance."

The major shook his head. "But I am worried that he's come to believe he's Snow White," he added, breaking into a broad grin. "So we may need a good psychiatrist on hand."

32

All four Prometheus principals entered Jim Connolly's laboratory mausoleum three days later, after consultation with top scientists and cardiologists who supported Enhanced Human Operations. Connolly's cardiovascular system was a mess, as he had said, and until just a year earlier even modern medicine wouldn't have been able to manage his issues.

But that had changed when EHO scientists had perfected respirocytes of the type that were now flowing through Justin Boyd's veins. These spherical nanobots were blood cell replacements, but a hundred times more efficient at delivering oxygen to cells. At the moment they were still classified and difficult to produce, costing millions of dollars per application, but if Connolly were pumped full of them, combined with modern surgery and pharmaceuticals, he could live a long life once he arrived from the past.

The underground lab was on the outskirts of Spokane, thirty-two miles away from where Connolly had buried the Enigma Cube in 1943. Like the cube, the entrance to the lab was hidden inside a cabin deep within a woods. The entrance concealed a stairway that led down into the lab's interior, and was buried under two feet of hard forest ground, and a six-inch-thick slab of natural, unpolished granite. The slab must have weighed ten thousand pounds, and had been put in place by Kelly's grandmother with the help of the Jordanian cube.

Given that the quartet had two cubes among them, an embarrassment of riches, they were able to effortlessly lift the granite cover away to reveal the descending stairs. As soon as they touched the first step, bright lights burst into life, illuminating both the stairs and the facility below.

Kelly couldn't help but feel like Indiana Jones as she descended, impressed with the simplicity of the one-room lab. It was in the shape

of a perfect square, about sixty feet on a side, and painted a soothing shade of lavender. Two massive banks of batteries lined the back wall.

According to Connolly, the stasis chamber was all but self-sustaining, needing only a trickle of the electricity provided by the batteries. A number of small, hidden vents brought air from the outside, which was passed through multiple filters to remove dust and other particles, so that the surfaces of the lab were remarkably pristine.

A banner lit up over the entrance proper as they neared the last step. “Welcome, Kelly and Justin,” it read, which brought a smile to all involved.

At the far end of the room stood what must have been the two identical stasis chambers, ten feet apart, looking like nothing more than transparent, high-tech caskets of unusual size. Their bases were stainless steel, and their sides and tops were made from ultra-clear acrylic.

Beside the chamber was a hermetically sealed vault, about the size of a refrigerator, which contained Jim Connolly’s lab notebooks, schematics, and extensive papers detailing his many breakthroughs, including the stasis chamber itself.

There was only one more item in the room. Hanging over the first stasis chamber was a giant poster of Snow White biting a shiny red apple, a still from the 1937 Disney movie. A sign had been attached to the wall underneath, but it was much smaller than the poster and unreadable from the entrance.

The quartet approached the stasis chambers and were soon close enough to read the sign. *I hung this poster for you, Justin,* it read. *Why? Because I’m sure you joked about my Snow White metaphors. But you do have to admit, I could be her identical twin, right?*

All four of the room’s occupants laughed, breaking the tension.

“It’s really, really hard not to like this guy,” said the colonel for the second time.

Sure enough, as Connolly had promised, one stasis chamber contained their friend, still barely alive, and the other was empty, indicating its inhabitant had been sent back in time.

Kelly and Justin gazed at their friend in the glorified coffin, who seemed to be sleeping peacefully on his back, dressed in nothing but a simple Roman tunic and leather sandals. There was a slight shimmer inside, as if from an energy field, but other than this there was no hint that he had managed to basically freeze all biological processes, despite the chamber remaining at room temperature.

Kelly was struck by how peaceful he looked, and also how strong and healthy. There was no way to tell from looking at him that a time bomb was ticking inside his chest.

Kelly climbed the stairs and placed the Jordanian cube in the center of four king-sized mattresses they had spread out in the cabin to soften her grandfather's arrival, not knowing if he would be able to lower himself to the ground before he passed out. A video camera was watching this landing pad and transmitting its footage to all of their cell phones.

Kelly descended the stairs and joined her friends near the stasis chamber. Since they didn't know what condition the time traveler would be in when he returned, Colonel Osborne had made sure a large military medevac helicopter was on standby five minutes away, a flying ambulance with cardiologists on board. Kelly had used the Enigma Cube two days earlier to instantly clear a space in the woods next to the cabin large enough for the helicopter to land. Less than twenty minutes after arrival, Connolly would be at Fairchild and a special surgical suite set up just for him. Emergency surgery could then be performed, if needed, and his blood could be replaced by a full supply of respirocytes.

Once Boyd's wife was again beside him, he followed the instructions Trek had passed on to work the controls at the foot of the stasis chamber, which would take Jim Connolly from near death to absolute death.

The moment the chamber registered that he was clinically dead, Kelly hit a timer on her phone, which began counting up to three minutes.

A spell of silence came over the room, which none of them dared break as they attempted the strangest Voodoo of all, conjuring up a

beloved friend from thousands of years in the past. Not only didn't anyone utter a single word, they barely breathed as the red numbers on Kelly's electronic stopwatch continued to climb.

Finally, she felt forced to break the long silence. "Seven," she whispered in anticipation. "Six. Five. Four . . . "

All eyes were glued to their phones and the mattress landing pad above them, waiting to witness the impossible.

"Three. Two. One!" finished Kelly.

Nothing happened.

It was as anticlimactic as a failed fireworks display.

Their hearts sank as additional seconds ticked by without a living Jim Connolly appearing near the Jordanian cube.

"Abort!" yelled Kelly after ten additional seconds had passed, and Boyd quickly reversed what he had done, returning Jim Connolly to his previous condition of stasis inside the chamber.

Kelly and Justin both looked sick to their stomachs, and were clearly reeling from profound disappointment. There would be no magic after all, no glorious reunion with a man who could make the impossible seem commonplace.

"Trek," Kelly broadcast at the cube, *"I'd like to ask you a few questions. Are you willing to let everyone here listen in on our exchange?"*

"I am," it replied.

"Thank you. Do you know why Jim Connolly didn't arrive here from the past?"

She glanced at her colleagues and could tell they were now hearing these telepathic words, courtesy of the alien AI.

"I do," replied Trek. *"But I can't tell you. I can assure you, however, that if he had asked the earlier version of me to send him here the instant his other self expired, I would have."*

"So something went wrong."

"That would be my interpretation, yes."

"Are you positive that he made it to the past in the first place? Alive?"

"I am," confirmed Trek

"Did he do anything to change the future?" she asked.

"Yes. His actions did cause ripples. But in the broad scheme of things,

these were inconsequential, and the inertia of the timeline drowned them out fairly quickly. After only about six years, the timeline reverted to its original form in every regard, and events unfolded precisely as they had before. So he failed in his mission, but he didn't do lasting harm to the future he knew."

Kelly nodded, surprised that the cube had revealed it had the ability to monitor slight changes in the timeline. "Is everyone still catching all of this?" she asked her colleagues, just to be sure. All indicated that they were.

She turned her attention back to Trek. *"So you won't tell us why he failed to return. Can you at least tell us about some of the actions he took in the past?"*

"I'm sorry, but I cannot."

Kelly couldn't think of any additional questions to even ask. Not at the moment. She knew from long experience that if an alien AI refused to divulge information, no arguments would change this.

Regardless, one thing was certain: Jim Connolly would not be returning to 2027 as he had planned.

They could do nothing but retrieve her grandfather's groundbreaking work and hope to find a way to reverse his stasis, which even he had been unable to accomplish.

Kelly felt a deep sadness and sense of injustice. Like a child on Christmas morning who had found a puppy at her door, only to later discover it had been delivered to the wrong house.

For the first time, despite the bright, clean surroundings, she felt like nothing more than a grave robber raiding a tomb.

33

Colonel Tom Osborne faced the large cartoon image of Snow White on the wall and frowned. The poster had given him the creeps when he had first seen it, almost two months earlier, but it was getting worse, and he really wanted to rip it down. Still, he wasn't about to follow through on this impulse and desecrate Jim Connolly's final resting place, even if the poster had been meant as a joke, and the man in question hadn't quite finished resting, even after fifty-six years.

The colonel and Harry Salazar exchanged anxious glances, but both were temporarily silent as the moment of truth approached.

Osborne gazed into the two side-by-side stasis chambers at Justin Boyd, who was like a son to him, and his wife Kelly, whom he was also coming to cherish. Two identical copies of these chambers stood empty, ten feet away.

The chambers had been created using Jim Connolly's exact blueprints, but with improved materials. The shells were now made of transparent aluminum, making them see-through all around, and the controls updated to digital touchscreens, with a system that was now fully automated.

At the moment, these hermetically sealed devices were still stasis chambers, but in minutes they could well be actual coffins, in every sense of the word. Osborne was struck by the absurdity of it all. It wasn't enough that he had killed Kelly and Justin once before. Apparently, he needed to take their lives for a second time.

These two new stasis chambers, along with the original, had been lined up in a neat row along the back wall of the laboratory mausoleum Jim Connolly had built. As if the setting wasn't surreal enough, all three occupants of the chambers were dressed in white Roman tunics. The two men wore a sleeveless, knee-length variety, while Kelly's tunic extended below the knee and had full sleeves.

Unlike Connolly, who wore sandals, Kelly and Justin had opted for traditional thick-soled walking shoes.

While the rescue attempt the pair was making was as momentous as any ever undertaken, with consequences that could well have a profound effect on the future of humanity, it was being done in absolute obscurity.

No media would be covering the grand climax that would soon take place inside the small underground lab. No one even knew it was taking place. In fact, only two spectators were in attendance, along with two AIs, and three of what Connolly had called corpsicles.

It had only taken a few days after their first visit to Jim Connolly's laboratory crypt for Kelly and Justin to insist that they go back to ancient times to rescue the man stranded there, despite knowing that one version of them would need to die to carry out their plan.

Osborne hadn't been the least bit surprised. He had expected them to insist on this the moment Connolly had failed to pop into existence in 2027, but they had at least shown the courtesy of waiting a while so they didn't seem impetuous.

Given that they had Connolly's blueprints for the stasis field, there was no technical reason not to do it. The chambers could be built by top black-site scientists and technicians, and fully tested, in only seven weeks. And there was little other preparation necessary, so the team could continue readying a new site and recruiting personnel, waiting for the day when everything would be in place to study their two cubes in earnest.

Kelly and Justin had argued passionately that going back to save Jim Connolly was worth the risk, and even the horror of sacrificing the lives of one set of themselves yet again. It was a scary and daunting prospect, but worth it if they could save a man they had come to love, and one who was truly irreplaceable.

Jim Connolly had already made more revolutionary discoveries than any scientist in history, with the exception of Newton, Einstein, and a few others. And his discoveries had been made six to eight decades ahead of his time. The theory behind the stasis field, for example, had been beyond the understanding of any modern scientist

they had shown it to. They could recreate the chamber, but still had no idea why it worked.

It was clear that Jim Connolly could make more progress unraveling the cube's secrets than all of their other recruits combined. Secrets that could yield incalculable benefits to humanity. So what *wouldn't* they sacrifice to get him involved?

Kelly and Justin had discussed the ethics of the decision with the group at great length, as they'd be relegating innocent versions of themselves to near certain death. Just because they were duplicates didn't mean their deaths would be any less tragic or unconscionable.

Still, this was a different scenario than what had happened before, which had been horrendous. The Kelly and Justin they had asked Osborne to kill in the clearing had been totally blindsided. They hadn't seen it coming, and hadn't agreed to it.

This time, the pair was making the considered decision to sacrifice themselves, knowing they would have to make a copy of themselves, and knowing that only one set would survive.

The metaphysical questions posed by this situation were mind-blowing. Was there a soul? If so, would both copies have one?

It was hard to argue that they wouldn't, since they would be identical in every way, just inhabiting different frames of a movie reel. In some ways, it was akin to asking if a person traveling from San Diego to New York had a soul in both places. Of course they did. They were the same person, just at two different locations. Their duplicates would be the same person, just coming from two different *times*.

Still, by creating fully formed human beings out of thin air, were they playing God? And if they did eliminate one pair, was that a bad thing? Or did it restore sanity to a universe that expected every soul to be unique?

How evil was it, really, to destroy a duplicate you had just created? What if you brought it into existence, and then destroyed it the very next instant?

For those who believed in God, hadn't he done much worse? Hadn't he condemned every living thing to death the moment it was born? At least Kelly and Justin were making backup copies.

So even though they were eliminating a version of themselves they had created out of whole cloth, one version of them would continue to exist in the universe. Wasn't that enough?

Regardless of what happened, they were guaranteed to continue on. If they failed in the past, Osborne could easily revive the 2027 versions in the stasis chamber, since they wouldn't even be close to the ninety-two-day expiration date.

But this wasn't true for Jim Connolly. If they didn't go back for him, his light, his genius, would be extinguished forever. There was no way they could allow this to happen.

Boyd had argued strenuously that he should go alone, but Kelly would have none of it. They were going to save *her* grandfather, after all, and they had repeatedly shown themselves to be an unbeatable team.

So the group agreed to go for it, as long as Kelly and Justin took great care not to impact the timeline in any appreciable way. They would tread as lightly as they could, and count on the inertia of history to smooth out any minor scratches they might make.

No modern weaponry would be allowed. Nothing that the Romans could make sense of or reverse engineer. They would bring a set of self-inserting comms for Connolly, and helpful heart pills that weren't available in 1971. Boyd would keep his smart contact lenses, his personal supercomputer, and his enhancements. And he and Kelly had both undergone the new procedure whereby tiny chips were implanted in their brains, allowing them to communicate telepathically with each other and with Sage.

The Romans could be handed all of these technologies and would never even suspect they had a function, let alone be able to dissect what this function might be.

They also planned to take along other tech goodies in hidden pockets concealed within their heavy tunics, but Trek nixed almost all of them, for reasons they couldn't always see. They had wanted to bring along a sonic generator, set for one use only, in case they wanted to knock out a large swath of people at once, but despite there being no way the Romans could reverse engineer this electronic

device, Trek had refused.

In the end, the alien AI had only approved heart pills for Kelly's grandfather and two additional hidden items, which Justin and Kelly would both carry. First, dropper bottles of a highly potent liquid metal embrittlement agent optimized for the type of iron likely to be used in Roman restraints. And second, rolls of C4x plastic explosive, designed to look like potter's clay. A thick strip of the substance was also glued under a thin strip of leather, which formed the belt for their tunics.

C4x was a recent invention, a plastic explosive three times more potent than C4, but with no requirement for a detonator or blasting caps to initiate an explosion. Unlike its parent, C4x could be triggered by a specific wireless signal, which Sage was capable of sending.

Once this was settled, all that was left to do was to carry out the plan.

Almost two months had passed while the chambers were being readied. Finally, earlier that morning, Kelly and Justin had made themselves comfortable inside their high-tech coffins, and Osborne, Salazar, and Trek had seen to it that the steps that Connolly had taken were repeated. First, they made duplicates of their friends and the stasis chambers. Second, Trek sent the duplicates back in time—leaving two of the four chambers empty. And third, the 2027 copies of their friends were returned to stasis.

Simple as pie.

Then the wait had begun. They had decided to give the Kelly and Justin now in stasis a few hours to recover from being clinically dead for so long. After that, they would return them to this state once again—this time with Jim Connolly along for the ride.

At the three-minute mark of clinical death, if the rescue had succeeded, Justin, Kelly, and her grandfather would all beam from the distant past onto the mattresses in the cabin, where the Jordanian cube had now been placed, and Osborne would order the medevac helicopter to land outside. The clinically dead versions of these three would then be allowed to die permanently, rather than being returned to stasis.

The first part of the plan had gone off without a hitch, as Trek

informed them that Kelly and Justin had arrived in the Roman Empire. They had wanted to arrive in the past well before Connolly had made his appearance there, but the cube hadn't been active at that time, so this wasn't possible.

They considered arriving exactly when Connolly had, but this hadn't worked out so well for him. Besides, Trek informed them that just over two hours after Connolly had arrived the cube had been left unattended again, making this point in time the obvious choice—even though Trek refused to specify exactly when and where this would be.

If everything went according to plan, they would arrive, find Jim Connolly, and immediately travel with him back to 2027, taking great care to leave the smallest footprint possible. Assuming the man they had come to rescue wasn't already dead.

Osborne wasn't a religious man, but he mouthed a silent prayer and turned to Harry Salazar. "What do you say, Harry?" he asked. "It's been two hours. Well, at least for us," he amended, as there was no telling how much time had passed for the Kelly and Justin in ancient times. "But we should probably get this show on the road."

Salazar blew out a long breath. "Sure," he said. "Why not? If we're going to kill our sleeping friends, there's no time like the present."

PART 6

“Such was the unhappy condition of the Roman emperors, that, whatever might be their conduct, their fate was commonly the same. A life of pleasure or virtue, of severity or mildness, of indolence or glory, all led to an untimely grave. And almost every reign was closed by the same disgusting repetition of treason and murder.”

— Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

34

Rome, 779 AUC (*Ab Urbe Condita*)

Kelly awoke, feeling cool air against her face, and shackles on her wrists. How had being bound in some way become commonplace? She had gone from being a pacifist geek scientist to an integral part of an elite team of operatives almost overnight.

She opened her eyes just a hair to see her husband on the ground and bound beside her. He was either still unconscious, or faking it, as she now was, but he looked to be in good health.

They had made it. This trip had been worse than ever, as they had only regained consciousness in her grandfather's crypt for a second before they had their minds wrenched through higher dimensions and crippled yet again. But they were alive.

It took her a few additional minutes to fully recover, as disjointed pieces of memory continued to return.

"Trek," she thought at the alien AI, and then remembered that it wouldn't be given this name for thousands of years to come. *"Alien AI,"* she amended, *"my name is Kelly. Your future self sent us here from 2027."*

There was no reply.

"Alien AI," she repeated, *"please respond."*

When no response was forthcoming, she screamed the same thought with all of her mental might, but once again it made no reply. Trek had assured her that it would talk to her in the past. Which could only mean one thing. While they were unconscious, the cube had been removed from their proximity. A horrible start to the mission. With the cube they were all powerful. Without it, potentially helpless.

"Justin, are you awake?" she thought at her husband. Her electronic implants knew to feed her thoughts to Sage, who would then feed them to him. The telepathy system would keep all thoughts

private that were not specifically directed at a person or AI.

Sage let her know that Boyd was trying to broadcast a response, but couldn't yet formulate a coherent statement. She waited for his mind to recover from the devastating scrambling brought on by time travel before trying to communicate further.

"Kelly?" he replied at long last, and if thoughts could sound groggy, his thoughts did now. *"What's going on?"*

"We just traveled to the distant past. Give yourself some time to re-acclimate."

She waited as patiently as she could, aware that the journey must have been much harder on him than it had been on her.

"Okay, I think I've recovered," he informed her minutes later. *"We made it! Our wrists are shackled, as always, but at least we're alive."*

"And now for the bad news. There's no sign of Trek."

"You didn't think the universe was going to make this easy on us, did you?" he thought, his wry tone somehow coming through, even telepathically.

They both opened their eyelids just enough to get a read on their situation. They were in a weed-infested open field outdoors, with nothing around them but four Roman legionnaires keeping guard about ten feet away, and dozens more off in the distance. Each wore armor, a helmet, and various swords, daggers, and lances.

Boyd scanned the area through lidded eyes, zooming in on the men with his smart contact lenses. He and Kelly then closed their eyes completely again to better fake continued unconsciousness.

"Sage, can you tell us anything about these soldiers?" he asked. The AI had been set so that all incoming and outgoing communications were relayed to both humans, unless otherwise specified.

"Yes, they are legionnaires with the Roman Praetorian Guard. The praetorians were the emperor's own personal army, whose mandate was to protect Rome and its ruler. As a group, they were equal parts elite special forces and secret police. In some ways, their role was similar to the German SS."

"And you can tell they're praetorians just from their appearance?" thought Boyd.

"Yes. Their shields are ovoid rather than square, which only praetorians used. And the shields have scorpion insignias, which the Guard used to honor Tiberius Caesar, whose birth sign was Scorpio."

"Does that mean it's likely that Tiberius is the current emperor?" pressed Boyd.

"Yes. Likely, but not certain. Still, if I had to speculate, given the presence of these men and this insignia, I'd say we are on the outskirts of the city of Rome, itself, at some time between 15 and 30 AD."

"Holy shit!" he thought at his wife. *"Do you know what that means?"*

Kelly nodded. *"Yes. We're only decades beyond the time of Jesus Christ."*

Like her grandfather and father before her, she was agnostic. But given that Boyd had been raised Catholic, she could well understand what this near miss might mean to him.

"You're just a little off," he thought at her, and she could sense his accompanying telepathic smile. *"It's a very common mistake, even for a brilliant scientist like you. Many people think that AD means After Death. But it really means Anno Domini. This is Latin for 'in the year of the Lord,'—meaning the year in which Jesus was born. A better name for AD would be AB—After Birth."*

"I'll be damned," thought Kelly, stunned that she had gotten the meaning of AD wrong her entire life. *"That would mean—"* She stopped, as if inviting her husband to finish the thought.

"Yes," broadcast Boyd excitedly. *"That Jesus is probably alive now, even as we speak. Or, even as we, you know . . . transmit thoughts."*

"Incredible," said Kelly. *"What are the odds?"*

"It's crazy to think about," he replied. *"I only wish we could stay longer."*

"We really can't."

Boyd sighed. *"I know,"* he thought back in frustration. *"We need to find Jim and get out of here as soon as we can,"* he added. Both he and Kelly had decided to call her grandfather Jim rather than Otto, since he had gone by this name now for twenty-eight years. *"I guess I'll have to leave an encounter with Jesus to my imagination."*

Kelly thought that such an encounter would be much too risky to the timeline, no matter what, but didn't mention this to her husband. *"What's the plan?"* she asked instead, changing the subject to something more immediate.

"We could escape, but what would be the point? We have no idea where Jim might be. Given our lack of knowledge, why make ourselves the subject of a manhunt? Or risk doing something that will change history? Let's learn what we can without rocking any boats. If we have to escape, we can."

"Agreed," thought Kelly. *"And speaking of escape, should I hit your cuffs with the embrittlement agent?"*

"I thought you'd never ask," transmitted Boyd, resisting a smile. *"But act like a snail so as not to alert the guards."*

"Understood," she thought, noting that the guards were engaged in heated conversation and largely ignoring them. Not surprising since she and Justin had likely been sleeping for hours.

Kelly slowly, methodically reached into one of her hidden pockets and removed a small bottle of liquid, making sure the iron chain between her wrists didn't rattle, and watching the guards through her eyelashes.

She froze! One of the men had torn his focus from the conversation and was turning his head in their direction. Kelly's arms were just a few inches off the ground and partially extended toward Boyd, and she managed to hide the bottle in the palm of her right hand, fighting to remain perfectly steady. Thankfully, after the guard gave them a cursory glance to satisfy himself that they were still out cold, he returned to ignoring them.

Kelly breathed a sigh of relief and continued to inch her body and hands closer to her husband. She moved an inch and then stopped. After checking the guards, she moved another inch and then stopped again. Rinse and repeat. It was painstakingly slow, but she finally reached her target and squirted a few milliliters of the clear liquid onto an iron link near the middle of the chain between Boyd's wrists.

Satisfied, she repeated her steps in reverse, carefully returning the bottle to the concealed inner pocket of her billowy tunic, completing

an exercise so deliberate that it had taken almost five minutes to accomplish.

With Boyd's enhanced strength, he might be able to break a link in the chain by himself, but the embrittlement agent guaranteed it. The link would maintain its cohesion until he applied a strong, quick force, and then its molecules would act almost as if they had been dunked in liquid nitrogen, becoming brittle and easily broken.

"Are you ready to formally wake up?" she asked him.

"I guess so," he thought wistfully, knowing this would be their last moment of calm before the storm. He threw his eyes open wide and rattled his shackles to draw the attention of the guards. "*Let's learn what hell we've gotten ourselves into this time,"* he added.

Kelly opened her own eyes. "At least we won't be bored," she whispered. "Dead, maybe," she added miserably. "But not bored."

35

Three of the four legionnaires guarding the now-awake prisoners drew nearer to them, unsheathing their swords. The fourth veered off at a brisk pace to fetch their commander, who was congregating with about two dozen soldiers thirty yards distant.

None of the legionnaires spoke as they awaited the arrival of their commander, who Sage indicated was a centurion in rank.

The commanding officer approached them as they sat on the hard ground in tunics, and studied them carefully. The American major wondered if he looked as out of place as he felt, and decided that he probably did.

The centurion focused on Boyd, ignoring Kelly entirely. “Explain yourself!” he demanded in Latin.

Sage sent an immediate English translation to the comms of the two Americans at about three times normal speaking rate. Both also had a tiny speaker pinned to the fabric covering their left shoulders. Sage was prepared to broadcast their thoughts through these speakers in whatever ancient language was required, using their voices. Unfortunately, now was not a good time for this approach, as it would only be effective if they could hide their lips.

“Sorry if we offended you,” thought Boyd rapidly at his AI, who instantly translated these words into Latin and fed them into his comm with the proper pronunciation. “*Nos paenitet si tibi offendi*,” said Boyd, slowly and painfully, butchering the pronunciation despite Sage’s best efforts. “We’re strangers here,” he added in mutilated Latin.

“And you think that pretending to barely be able to speak will help convince me of that?” snapped the centurion in contempt.

Boyd paused for a moment to hear Sage’s hurried translation into English, and then quickly shot words back at the AI to translate into

Latin. “Can I ask your name, sir?” said Boyd as politely as he could.

“Linus Vetus,” the man replied. “But address me as *centurion*. What are your names?”

“I’m Boyd. This is Kelly.”

Vetus scowled, as if he found these unusual names personally offensive. “So how long have you been working with Marcus Dorso?”

“Who?” said Boyd, as Sage helpfully flashed a message on his contacts that it had found no one by this name in its historical database, which now contained almost everything ever written about the Roman Empire and the time period it spanned.

“Don’t play stupid!” said Vetus. “Senator Marcus Dorso,” he repeated. “The man conspiring against the empire. Just so you know, we rounded him up, along with his fellow conspirators, while you were unconscious.”

Boyd felt frustration growing within him, already strained by the need to think his replies to Sage and then quickly repeat its translation, one or two words at a time. Still, what other choice did he have? English wouldn’t come on the scene for five hundred years.

“I’m sorry, Centurion,” he said. “I don’t know him.” *I paenitet, non novi illum.*

Vetus shot him an icy smile. “Come now . . . Boyd. We found you hiding in a grove of trees less than four hundred paces from the home of Octavius Gallus. Exactly when an important meeting of the conspirators was taking place there. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“How did you find us?” asked Boyd.

“We were monitoring the meeting from a distance, wanting to learn who was involved. We heard two very loud cracks, like something arising from an enormous whip, and went to investigate. We found you there, out cold, and relocated you to where you are now.”

Vetus glared at the American major. “So what were you doing there?” he demanded. “Were you observing the meeting also? Or were you on the lookout for us? What was that sound? And why were you unconscious? Neither of you had a mark on you.”

Boyd sighed. He had plenty of his own questions. What had

become of the cube after they arrived? Who was Marcus Dorso? What was this alleged conspiracy about?

He also doubted that their arrival in such close proximity to a pivotal meeting was coincidental. But at this point he couldn't even hazard a guess as to what the connection between these two events might be.

"We know nothing about a meeting," he said in his usual, painfully awkward Latin.

"You're lying. Not only were you hiding out in the grove during the meeting, we kept track of the participants afterwards. Dorso returned to the exact spot we found you in."

"Then Dorso must be the one who moved the cube," broadcast Kelly.

"Which gives us a great lead," replied Boyd telepathically. He tilted his head. "So where did Dorso go after that?" he asked the centurion.

"I'm asking the questions!"

"Please," said Boyd. "Answer a few for me, and I'll answer yours."

Vetus considered for several seconds. "The senator traveled to the banks of the Tiber, before almost immediately returning to his residence on Aventine Hill."

"Thank you," said Boyd. "Have you seen anyone else unconscious? Or a small white cube?"

"A small white cube?" said Vetus in disbelief. "Why are you wasting my time?" The centurion drew his dagger and leaned in closer to his prisoner, holding the point against Boyd's throat. "No more inane questions. Tell me how you fit in. Now!"

"I have no idea how to even bluff here," he thought hurriedly at Kelly.

"You'll think of something," she replied unhelpfully. *"You're great under pressure, remember?"*

Boyd pulled his head back to put space between the point of Vetus's blade and his neck, and his mind went into overdrive. He needed to stall for time and see if their prime suspect had the cube. "I'll tell you," he said in Latin. "But only after you take us to Marcus Dorso."

"I thought you didn't know him."

“I was lying. Take us to him.”

The centurion’s lips curled into a malevolent smile. “Be careful what you wish for,” he said, quoting a phrase first used in *Aesop’s Fables* hundreds of years earlier. “It turns out that our glorious regent, Lucius Sejanus, is with him at his residence right now.”

He paused as though this name would petrify his prisoner, and Boyd understood why, being enough of a historian to recognize it without Sage’s help. Sejanus was a true nightmare, having usurped almost all of Tiberius’s power while this emperor was off on the Island of Capri, killing subjects on a whim and living a life of debauchery.

Vetus glared at his male prisoner. “So you can answer to *me*,” he said coldly, “*or* . . . you can answer to *Praetor* Sejanus. But, believe me, you don’t want to answer to *him*.”

Boyd nodded grimly. “It turns out that I do,” he said. “In fact, I’ll tell my story to him—and *only* him.”

Vetus stared at his prisoner for several seconds, taking his measure. “You’re making a big mistake,” he said.

“Not at all,” said Boyd with just the hint of a smile. “Marcus Dorso *and* Lucius Sejanus?” he added in broken Latin. “Together? This must be my lucky day.”

36

Jim Connolly sat on a marble bench in the home of Marcus Dorso, his wrists and ankles shackled, trying to ignore the bloody and mutilated body of one of the senator's friends, which was much too close for comfort. Instead, he held his gaze on the imposing figure of Lucius Sejanus, desperately trying to figure out how best to play this.

"Who *are* you?" said the regent. "And how do you have the audacity to look me in the eye? You should be in awe, cowering in my presence."

The time traveler continued to calculate at a furious pace, knowing that this man would be ruthless and unpredictable. Connolly had survived the Third Reich and had met Heinrich Himmler, himself, so had seen his share of psychopathic behavior. Still, he had to gauge his responses very carefully to have even a chance of getting out of this.

"I'm a stranger," he replied. "A visitor to Rome from a far-off land—who is just passing through. A man who seems to have accidentally found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You should know that my men were spying on the meeting today from a distance. Seeing who would show up."

"What meeting?"

"Don't play stupid. You know what meeting. The one at the residence of Octavius Gallus. And we now have everyone in attendance under house arrest. One of them is sure to give you up."

"I'm not worried," said Connolly. "Because I have nothing to do with them."

Sejanus didn't buy it, of course, and went on to suggest that Dorso and Connolly had been engaging in bondage and S&M. When Connolly denied it, Sejanus went on to disclose that Dorso wasn't just part of the conspiracy against Tiberius and Sejanus, he was in *charge* of it.

Even more intriguing, Dorso had tapped *himself* to replace the

emperor.

Connolly continued to profess his ignorance, which gained him nothing but a thumb shoved into his shoulder wound, causing him to scream in agony.

"I understand your impulse to protect Dorso," the regent was now saying. "I do. He seems to engender loyalty and respect. I've seen it. But you can't protect him. As I said, I plan to have him executed right after we're finished, anyway. But even more importantly, he isn't who you think he is. Not his background, or his goals."

Sejanus described Dorso's anti-slavery stance, which he deemed insane, and then went on to insist that the man was an impostor, a mere peasant when he arrived in Rome eight years earlier, who had used his charm to pass himself off as a member of the highest class and get himself adopted by the wealthy Cassius Dorso.

"So is this really the man you want to die for?" said Sejanus. "Is this really a man worthy of letting yourself be carved up to protect? A man who will be dead in less than an hour."

He paused to let these questions sink in.

"But it gets worse still," continued Sejanus. "Much worse. Because I didn't tell you his *real* origins. After much further digging, I've learned that he was born a *Jew*. A despicable offshoot of humanity. When I'm made emperor, I plan to slaughter every last resident of our Judean province, the region from which he came.

"Ironically, he comes from the same village as another Jew who has recently become a giant thorn in our side. A preacher who is giving us nothing but headaches in the region. One spewing repentance, and love, and a higher power than Rome."

Connolly turned white. "Who is the current governor of Judea?" he asked.

"Pontius Pilate. Why?"

Connolly reeled as he realized that the man giving Sejanus headaches in Judea had to be Jesus Christ. *Had to be*. Perhaps the most significant figure in human history—in the flesh.

He questioned Sejanus further, but learned he knew very little about the preacher in Judea. Regardless, it suddenly became clear to

him that Jesus Christ was the *real* target of the cube's quest. The real reason it had broken all its own rules by self-activating and seeking Dorso out. Dorso was simply a means to an end.

It was unclear to Connolly just why the cube thought influencing Jesus's old village-mate in Rome would have a desired impact in Judea. Perhaps it had wanted to help the senator escape Sejanus, instead of inflaming the praetor's hatred of Jews further, potentially leading to the death of Jesus while his ministry was still in its infancy.

After considerable further thought, Connolly realized that he didn't have any hope of understanding the cube's motivations. Not given his current lack of information. So he had no other choice but to trust the cube's good intentions, and push Dorso to do as it asked of him.

"So what will it be?" continued the emperor's regent. "Will you tell me what I need to know? Or will you die horribly to protect a lowly plebeian? Worse, a mad, duplicitous Jew."

Connolly barely heard the question. All he could think of was that he had to find a way for Dorso to escape. He had thought it of paramount importance before—but he hadn't known the *half* of it.

He quickly seized on a plan. It was desperate, and likely to fail, but it was the best he could do. He needed to appear to switch sides. To talk Sejanus into letting him get his hands on the three self-igniting flares he had brought with him. These would create a red smokescreen for Dorso's escape, one that would terrorize anyone from this time, who would think the smoke was magical, and probably deadly.

Connolly would confess that he *had* joined forces with Dorso, but only as means to get to Tiberius, whom he loathed. And that it was now obvious that he had bet on the wrong man. That he was now eager to serve Sejanus—the *right* man—and help him take down the emperor and assume power.

He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by several sharp raps on the door.

"Enter!" shouted Sejanus, clearly annoyed by the interruption.

A soldier opened the door and stepped inside.

"Centurion Vetus?" said Sejanus in surprise. "I thought you

weren't scheduled to arrive for several hours."

"I wasn't, sir. But something came up that I thought justified coming sooner."

"Was there a problem rounding up the conspirators?"

"None at all. But earlier, while we were monitoring the meeting at Gallus's home from a distance, we found two spies. A man and a woman. In civilian clothing. Unarmed. And both were unconscious."

"Were they injured?"

The centurion shook his head. "Not that we can tell, sir. By the looks of it, no one touched them. Yet they were out so completely that we weren't able to even rouse them—for a number of hours. We have no explanation. When they finally awoke, the male, who only speaks halting Latin, said he would explain—but only to you."

"So you decided to join me early?"

"Yes, sir. Both prisoners and twenty-six of my men are outside. I hope that I didn't overstep."

"No," said Sejanus, "you did well. And your timing is good. I was about to order Dorso's execution. Now all three of these mysterious conspirators can get a demonstration of what happens to those who refuse to cooperate."

He smiled maliciously. "If that doesn't loosen their tongues, nothing will."

37

Jim Connolly's breath caught in his throat.

The two new prisoners were his granddaughter and Major Justin Boyd. They had to be. It fit perfectly. Two intruders who were unconscious for seemingly no reason. The male speaking halting Latin, which was no doubt Boyd doing his best to repeat Sage's translated words.

Which meant that Connolly had *already* executed the escape attempt he was about to begin. In a previous iteration of the timeline.

And he had been killed.

A horrifying realization, but not unexpected. At least his death hadn't been in vain. He must have succeeded in freeing Marcus Dorso, or the timeline would have become so mangled that neither Justin nor his granddaughter would ever have come into existence.

The fact that Connolly, himself, was still present in Rome didn't indicate anything about how he might have changed the future. Eeny had made it clear that once you were in a past time you were grandfathered in, even if you changed things so that you were never born.

But *their* presence here spoke volumes, indicating the future had resumed its rightful course fairly quickly, despite his interference.

He loved them for their willingness to mount such a daring rescue attempt, but they should never have come. For them to return home, their future selves would have to die. And they had put the timeline back at risk. Boyd was beyond formidable, but their arrival had brought twenty-six more soldiers into the mix that otherwise wouldn't have arrived until after Connolly's attempted escape. Surely even Boyd couldn't overcome this many soldiers, especially given that Trek had doubtlessly made sure he didn't bring modern weapons.

Connolly was in a fog as his leg restraints were removed and he was ushered outside for the first time, to the edge of a rich and

expansive garden that Dorso maintained along his property. Herbs and vegetables were growing on one side, with mulberry trees and blooming multicolored flowers of several types on the other.

Farther away, thick groves of olive trees were clustered all around, each specimen as mature and magnificent as any he had ever seen. Sejanus, two legionnaires, and the newly arrived centurion accompanied Connolly beyond the boundaries of the gardens, where Marcus Dorso was standing in a large clearing.

And so were Kelly and Justin, just as he had known they would be.

Connolly felt the world spinning around him, and his past flashed before his eyes. Both looked exactly as he had last seen them, twenty-eight years earlier, and it was as though he had been with them in Canada and Spokane just yesterday. At the same time, he felt the crushing weight of all the years that had passed as he had aged beyond them.

Seeing them again was thrilling, and heartbreaking, and overwhelming.

A tear escaped from the corner of his left eye. He had dreamed of this moment for a very long time.

But their reunion was not supposed to take place in Ancient Rome.

And all three of them would almost certainly be dead in a matter of minutes.

Kelly and Justin stood near the top of Aventine Hill and waited for Centurion Vetus to return from a villa in the distance, no doubt with Lucius Sejanus in tow. The villa was too far away to make out details, but it appeared to be impressive, as were the extensive gardens leading to it, and groves of magnificent olive trees surrounded them at a distance on all sides.

They had marched here with over two dozen legionnaires, and joined nine others in a clearing who loosely surrounded a man whose hands were shackled like theirs. She guessed that the man in the

middle was the infamous Marcus Dorso.

She had called out to the Jordanian cube with her mind the moment they had halted there and wasn't surprised when she didn't get an answer. If this Dorso really did control an active cube, he wouldn't be a prisoner. Instead, the crushed and decomposing bodies of the guards would now be fertilizing the gardens.

Whoever the prisoner was, he had a calm, commanding presence, despite his predicament, and his clean-shaven, deeply masculine face was strikingly handsome. His skin tone was Mediterranean, making him look as if he had a perpetual tan, with hair a shiny, vibrant black, like obsidian.

"We're in trouble here, Kelly," said her husband telepathically. *"This Sejanus is like Rome's version of Shen Ning. Very smart, and very ruthless. And he has a huge advantage in numbers and weaponry."*

"We defeated Shen. We can do the same here."

"We're strangers in a strange land. We have small bits of history to guide us, but this era couldn't be more alien. And we have no idea what's going on. I'm counting thirty-nine soldiers, all armed with shields and lots of sharp, pointy objects. The twenty-six we arrived with, the nine guarding this prisoner, the centurion, two guards outside the villa, and Sejanus."

Kelly swallowed hard. It was difficult to argue that this situation wasn't daunting. Boyd was unsurpassed at hand-to-hand combat, but not when his opponents were wearing helmets and body armor, and possessed the sharp, pointy objects to which he had referred. Back home, he still could have prevailed, an unstoppable one-man army, but his ability to use Sage, drones, and other tech toys as force multipliers had been completely curtailed.

Behind Boyd, five men suddenly came into view as they appeared from behind several mulberry trees in the garden. Four legionnaires and a prisoner.

Her grandfather!

She gasped and grabbed Boyd's arm, turning him so that he was facing the man they had come to rescue. Her grandfather looked exactly the way he had when Trek had replayed his message for them.

"Otto!" she yelled toward him in delight, reaching into another

concealed pocket in her tunic. Without waiting for a response she rushed forward to greet him, and the guards let her through, which would not have been the case had Boyd tried this same stunt.

She quickly closed the significant distance between her and her grandfather while all the soldiers in the clearing, and those approaching, looked on in dismay. She finally reached him and lifted her shackled hands over his head and behind his back, hugging him ferociously as tears began streaming down her face.

He hugged her back with just as much joy and affection, leaking additional tears of his own, while Sejanus looked on with great interest.

“Take this and put it in your ear,” she whispered to her grandfather, shoving a tiny gray sphere the size of a ball bearing into his hand. “It’s a comm. It will travel to your cochlea and self insert. You won’t feel it.”

The praetor’s patience had run out, and at his orders, one of the two legionnaires pulled them apart.

“Enough!” he yelled in Latin, and then walked at a brisk pace toward Boyd, ordering his men to bring the prisoners behind him.

Boyd hadn’t moved, but his eyes were moist as well, and Sejanus seemed to zero in on this immediately. “The three of you aren’t simply working together, are you?” he said to the American major. “You both react like this man is a loved one whom you thought you’d never see again.”

Boyd shook his head. “Not at all,” he said in broken Latin, repeating the words Sage dictated to him. “We’re just comrades. But given our predicament, emotions are running high.”

“Interesting,” said Sejanus with a chilling smile, not buying it for a moment. “Because they’re about to run even higher. I don’t suppose you want to tell me what you’re doing here? Whatever your plan was, it failed miserably.”

Boyd remained silent as the soldiers and their two prisoners caught up and stopped. While Boyd was watching, Connolly casually pretended to scratch his ear, depositing the tiny plastic ball inside and giving Boyd the slightest nod.

The regent continued to stare at the American major. “Centurion Vetus tells me you confessed to knowing Marcus Dorso.”

“Not true,” said Boyd. “I said I *wanted* to know him. My Latin isn’t great.”

Sejanus shook his head in contempt. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but it’s clear that the three of you are very close, and care about each other above all else.” He nodded at the two prisoners who had just joined them. “If I had to guess, I’d say that she’s your wife, and he’s her father.

“Regardless,” he continued, “I’ll be having Marcus Dorso put to death while you watch. To get you and your *comrades* into the proper frame of mind. And then, if you still insist on playing games, you can watch while I torture your woman.”

Boyd snarled at the regent like a feral animal, desperately wanting to snap the chain between his wrists and take the man hostage. To kill him if he had to. But Sejanus was the one man here he knew for certain he couldn’t kill, as he was too important to a history that had yet to unfold.

It was maddening that Boyd’s best ticket for escape was off limits. He and Kelly might die here, but as long as they didn’t change history, they would live again in 2027.

Sejanus turned to face Marcus Dorso, twenty yards distant, and nodded at the soldier nearest to the senator. “Optio Flavius,” he called out. “You will have the honor of killing this treasonous impostor. This lowly, despicable peasant who thought he could overthrow Tiberius. I want his head put on a spike and brought to me, so he can serve as a cautionary tale for these other prisoners during their upcoming interrogation.”

“Understood, sir,” said Flavius.

“Do you think your sword is sharp enough to sever his head with a single strike?” asked the regent. “Or would you like to use mine?”

“Thank you, sir, but I’ve kept mine very sharp. I don’t foresee any trouble.”

Sejanus ordered two other men to hold Dorso down and pull back on his head to expose his neck to Flavius’s blade.

“As soon as they have him properly positioned,” said Sejanus to his selected executioner, “you’re free to carry out your orders. We’re all looking forward to seeing justice served.”

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As the two legionnaires approached Dorso to hold him down, the condemned man stared at them defiantly, unflinchingly, well aware that escape was impossible and accepting his fate with remarkable dignity.

Jim Connolly closed his eyes and threw his head back to face the sky directly overhead. “Justin, we can’t let this man die!” he said urgently in English, as if he were speaking to the Roman god Jupiter in tongues rather than the comrade beside him in a language no Roman had ever heard. “Our entire timeline depends on his survival! You have to trust me! He has to escape to the west. Nothing else matters—including our lives.”

Boyd began calculating options even before Connolly was finished. Freeing Dorso was a suicide mission, but he had to take his friend’s word that it was vitally important. Sage instantly brought him to full combat readiness by having his implants induce transcranial electrical stimulation in his brain, amping up his mental and physical acuity even higher than normal. At the same time, genetically enhanced adrenaline coursed through his body, further increasing his strength and reaction speed.

“Jim, I need a diversion,” he thought, knowing that Sage would transmit these words to Connolly’s newly installed comm. *“Separate from the group so everyone here can see you. Then roll on the ground like you’re having a seizure. I want all eyes on you. Now!”*

All thirty-nine Roman soldiers present in the vast clearing had already stopped what they were doing to watch Connolly issue a strange incantation in an unknown language. But their attention was drawn to him even further as he rushed away from his Roman escorts and fell to the ground with his tongue extended and eyes bulging, thrashing around as if he were being attacked by a swarm of bees.

While all eyes were on Connolly, Boyd thrust his arms apart,

snapping the pre-weakened middle link of the chain between his wrists, and then burst forward like an Olympic sprinter reacting to a starting gun. His genetically enhanced musculature gave him the speed of Usain Bolt, and he made it halfway to Dorso's position before anyone fully registered that he had even moved.

Three of the nine legionnaires nearest Dorso drew their swords as this rampaging bull approached, while others took their first steps to move in his direction from all compass points.

Boyd came to an abrupt halt in front of the first soldier, dodging his sword with superhuman reflexes. He knifed the legionnaire in the neck with the hard edge of his right hand and snatched the Roman's shield while the man was still falling to the ground, his movements so fast the soldiers watching couldn't believe their own eyes.

The American major quickly took out three additional men who seemed to him to be moving in slow motion, using the shield as both protection against sharp objects and a bludgeon, and wielding its edge like a knife-hand against enemy necks.

Boyd's artificial blood pumped oxygen through his body at higher levels than elite athletes could even dream of, and his respiratory rate and pulse remained steady, despite his superhuman exertions. As he spun around to take in a panoramic view of what had become a battlefield, he vaguely heard Sejanus barking orders. Dozens of men were approaching him from every angle, which worked to his advantage as they couldn't throw spears without risk of hitting each other.

"Behind you!" screamed Kelly in the distance, and he wheeled around just in time to block an arm that was coming down at savage speed toward his back, an instant before the dagger in the attacker's hand could deliver a fatal blow.

He swept the man's legs out from under him, driving him into the hard turf, and slammed the heel of his hand into the nose of a second charging soldier with enough force to crush this appendage and drive him into unconsciousness. He dodged two other soldiers as if he knew what moves they would make before they did, and knocked them both out with blows from the heavy iron cuffs still clamped to his wrists,

while the small lengths of chain still attached whipped into their faces to inflict even more damage.

The sword of yet another soldier managed to find a piece of Boyd while he was preoccupied, but even so the American managed to dodge well enough that it only managed to slice a shallow groove across his left upper arm, and he quickly dispatched the attacker with a spin kick that arrived so quickly the man never knew it was coming.

Less than twenty seconds had passed since Boyd had broken his shackles, and nine Roman hostiles were down. More importantly, he had worked his way ever nearer his target. While he was now losing artificial blood from his arm, which had been designed to look identical to real blood, the respirocytes facilitated clotting at many times the normal rate to keep losses as low as possible.

He sprinted the last five yards that separated him from Marcus Dorso and finally reached the senator's side. *"Prope maneat!"* he screamed. *Stay close.*

Five soldiers now blocked their escape to the west. Boyd wielded his borrowed shield in a breathtaking blur, moving it so quickly and precisely that he was able to block swords and daggers while using it as a bludgeon and knife-edge to tear through their ranks like a cartoon Tasmanian Devil. One moment there was a wall of five armed and determined men, and the next nothing but unconscious bodies littering the ground.

Even without his enhancements he had huge advantages. He was expert in a number of modern fighting techniques, and he had trained in many dozens of virtual reality practice skirmishes even more one-sided than this one, where he had learned that to be an elite warrior was to strike savagely, without hesitation or second-guessing. No queasiness over hurting an opponent, no mercy, and no stopping to congratulate oneself. Nothing but focus, speed, confidence, and savage intent.

He took out four additional guards coming in from the west with additional dazzling demonstrations of speed, decisiveness, and precision, finally clearing a path to the westerly escape route Connolly had dictated, like a punishing linebacker clearing a lane for a star

running back.

"Run to the olive trees!" he barked at Dorso in Latin. "To the west! Go!" he added, giving him a gentle shove in that direction.

"Marcus, do what we discussed!" shouted Connolly off in the distance as the senator began to run, his hands still bound.

Boyd turned to face the east and backpedaled so quickly that he nearly matched Dorso's pace. Now that the American major had cleared the field to the west, the wall of soldiers behind them no longer feared using their spears, which they did now with considerable zeal. Boyd blocked any that came close as he shuffled backwards, impressed by the shield's ability to stand up to the barrage.

Just as they made it to the protection of the olive trees, three spears arrived at once and Boyd could only block two. The third just missed impaling his right forearm, carving a shallow red groove across it instead on its way to the ground.

"Curre!" he screamed at his ward. *Run!* "I'll hold them off."

Boyd slowly worked his way toward the middle of the large grove as a wave of soldiers reached the first trees. He noted with satisfaction that Dorso had found a magnificent white horse tied loosely to a branch and was already mounting it. Seconds later Boyd blew out a relieved breath as the senator began galloping away to the west—and safety.

There were now enough trees surrounding Boyd that spears were nearly ineffective, and he could move quickly enough so as to face a single-file line of hostiles, rather than multiple attackers at the same time. Even so, the odds were still stacked against him. Especially since he hadn't finished off any of the soldiers he had incapacitated, reluctant to risk killing someone who might later have a significant impact on the timeline.

"legionnaires, stop!" thundered Sejanus, who had entered the forest of olive trees along with Centurion Vetus. "Cease fighting and remain silent!" he added, and in seconds the grove became bizarrely quiet.

Four men prodded Kelly and Otto forward into the grove, holding two swords at each of their throats.

“Can you see your woman?” Sejanus shouted in Boyd’s direction. “She’s about to lose her pretty head. Surrender now and I’ll spare her. And the other prisoner you care so much about, as well.”

Sage completed the translation with alacrity, as usual, but Boyd didn’t need any words to know what Sejanus had said. It was an all too familiar story, one told countless times throughout history. The best way to kneecap a great warrior was to threaten his loved ones. Shen had just done the same in 2027.

“Do I have your word that you won’t harm them?” shouted Boyd from behind the trunk of a distant tree.

“If you and they cooperate, yes,” said Sejanus.

Boyd’s decision was obvious. He could take out any number of additional legionnaires, which is why Sejanus was giving him this option, but in the end he’d fall. Even if he could escape, he wouldn’t leave Kelly and her grandfather behind. And without the cube, they’d be trapped here forever.

All that mattered was that he had saved Dorso’s life, which Connolly was certain was of paramount importance.

He stepped several paces away from the gnarled trunk and dropped his shield. “I surrender,” he said unnecessarily.

Within a few minutes shackles had been placed around his ankles, and the broken restraints binding his wrists had been replaced with a new pair. Three soldiers stationed themselves behind him with their swords drawn and at the ready.

Sejanus issued an order to one of the men behind Boyd, and even before Sage could finish the translation the man acted, savagely slamming the heavy hilt of his sword into the back of Boyd’s skull with great ferocity.

And with that, the one-man army named Justin Boyd collapsed to the ground, unconscious or dead.

39

The American major began to stir and reflexively touched the back of his head, bringing on such severe pain that he was instantly jolted into full wakefulness. He was surprised to be alive, but guessed this condition would be fleeting.

He was lying on his stomach atop a small mattress on a raised bed, one that wouldn't have been that out of place in his own time, except for the unusual construction of the mattress and its diminutive size. It was even covered by a thick wool blanket.

As had become common, his hands and ankles were shackled, this time with thicker chain than had been used before, and both were also chained to iron bars embedded in a rectangular opening in the room—a window to the outside without the glass. Rays of a rising sun streamed into the room, an indication that he had been out for fourteen hours or more.

He had no memory of the blow he had taken, but it must have been ferocious to put him down so quickly and for so many hours.

The chains had considerable play, allowing him to shift to a seated position on the bed, which was tucked into a small indentation at the back of the room. The room itself was both spacious and elegant, with murals covering the walls, depicting tranquil scenes of the Roman countryside in pastel colors, and a mosaic floor tiled in clever geometric patterns.

He fought off rising panic as he realized that he was alone.

"Kelly!" he thought with all of his might. *"Kelly, are you out there?"*

Several endless seconds passed. *"Justin, thank God you're okay,"* responded his wife, using Sage-assisted telepathy. *"How's your head? Are you able to think clearly?"*

"I'll be okay," he replied, this time speaking out loud since no one was around to hear, and wouldn't understand if they were, relying on Sage to deliver his words to her comm. "I'm actually on a bed in a

private room. I have a few cuts, but they've already clotted over. I also have a monster headache and one hell of a painful welt on my skull."

He winced. "But you know, any concussion you can walk away from . . ." he added in amusement, mirroring an earlier comment she had made about teleportation.

"Is that gallows humor?" she asked, also switching to speech.

"Well, an *attempt*, anyway," he replied. "And speaking of humor, I'm hereby declaring all jokes about me having a thick skull off limits."

"Wow, Justin, way to take all the fun out of a near fatal blow to the head."

Boyd laughed despite himself.

"I love you, Justin," she said, her banter suddenly giving way to the heavy emotion she had bottled up since his reawakening, which now exploded to the surface. "I was so worried," she added, and he could tell that tears were now running down her face. "You were out for *two* nights. I wasn't sure you were going to make it this time."

Boyd winced. Two nights? His concussion had been worse than he had thought. "You know how hard I am to kill," he said softly, wishing he could hold her.

"You've certainly been put to the test," she said, her voice still choked up but regaining strength. "I mean, you were clinically dead for three minutes. Then knocked unconscious by time travel. And then clocked in the head. That's a lot of abuse to take in such a short period. That's a lot of abuse to take in a *lifetime*."

"I'm sorry to give you such a scare," he said gravely. "But I'll be okay."

"You'd better be," she whispered softly.

"So where are you, Kelly?" he asked, moving the conversation forward. "And where's Jim?"

"We're both in separate bedrooms, just like you, although we have no idea if we're in the same residence or not. While you were out I ordered Sage to set things up so any communication one of us makes is relayed to all three of us."

"Hello, Justin," said Connolly warmly as Boyd's comm amplified

his whispered words. They didn't know where they were in relation to one another, but all were within Sage's transmission range of about a quarter mile. "It's so great to see you again. So great to have you here in Rome. Sorry we weren't able to have a proper reunion."

"*That's* what you're sorry about?" said Boyd in amusement. "Not that you sent me off into battle against thirty-nine armed Roman soldiers?"

"Well, if I had known how *slow* you were getting," replied Connolly playfully, "I would have sent Kelly."

"Really?" replied Boyd. "I think I liked you better as Otto," he added, and immediately heard Connolly break into laughter through his comm.

Boyd paused. "But it is incredible to be with you again, my friend," he added, with a depth of emotion that surprised even himself. "No matter what age you're at. Or what age you're *in*."

"It means the world to me that you mounted this rescue attempt," said Connolly. "And while you shouldn't have, I've never been happier to see anyone."

Boyd let these words sit for several seconds and then sighed. It was time to get down to business. "So tell me where we are," he said, "and how we got here."

"We walked," replied Kelly, "and you were carried. It took a while. We're on another of Rome's seven hills, although I'm not sure which one. I was able to slip Jim some of the heart pills we brought, by the way, so he should be able to exert himself for a time without passing out, or you know . . . worse."

"Good work," said Boyd.

"We were brought to an array of three grand villas and a smaller residence," she continued. "Well spread out. And we were separated. Since then, we've been well fed and well treated, and largely left alone. We each have a single cuff around our right wrist, attached to a metal grid in the window, with plenty of play in the chain. Sage has been monitoring your condition and providing updates.

"By the way," she added, "we've also been given a fresh change of clothing. Assuming this will be true in your case, you should hide the

embrittlement fluid, C4x, and heart pills right now. And your lapel speaker, which you'll be able to pin to your new tunic."

Boyd did as she suggested, carefully placing these items under the back corner of his small mattress until the new clothing arrived.

"Kelly brought me up to speed on your recent activities in 2027," said Connolly. "I knew you'd find a way to get the cube from China. But it was an inspired plan, Justin. Using teleportation itself to locate the cube was a neat trick."

"Thanks," said Boyd. "And obviously she told you we visited your stasis chamber, and that you never showed up."

"I didn't have to," said Kelly. "The moment he overheard the centurion describing our inglorious presence here, he knew it was us —and why we had come."

"I'm not surprised I didn't make it back," said Connolly. "I was about to try to free Dorso myself, using three road flares that Trek let me bring. I only had thirteen men to overcome, not thirty-nine like you, but it was still a suicide mission. Even so, I must have managed to spring Dorso before I was killed. If not, history would have changed so wildly there wouldn't be a Kelly and Justin to try to fetch me."

"As it was," said Boyd, "Trek calculated that your activities only caused minor ripples in the timeline for about six years. After that, it was entirely restored to its original course."

"Kelly told me."

"So what makes this Marcus Dorso so important?" asked Boyd. "And what's with this conspiracy he's involved in?"

Connolly repeated what he had already told Kelly, reiterating his conversations with Dorso and Sejanus with near perfect accuracy. He described Dorso as both brilliant and charismatic, and detailed how the cube had broken its own rules by self-activating and seeking Dorso out. How the senator had questioned his own sanity and sought to dispose of the cube, first near the home of Octavius Gallus, and then in the Tiber River. And how Connolly had come to learn that Dorso had been planning to overthrow both Tiberius and Sejanus and assume the role of emperor.

Finally, Connolly described how he had become convinced that

the cube had approached Dorso to have him influence the life of Jesus Christ in some way. “I’m not religious,” he said. “But even assuming that Jesus was just a man, no one can deny that he played as pivotal a role in shaping the timeline as anyone in human history. Which means that the future is certain to be exquisitely sensitive to even minor changes to his story. Kill him earlier or later than history and scripture reflect, shorten or extend his ministry, or impact his message, and you don’t just get minor ripples in the timeline that die out in six years. You get the mother of all tidal waves. A tsunami that builds decade after decade, sweeping away the future landscape and replacing it with one that’s completely unrecognizable.”

“I agree,” said Boyd. “But we still can’t be positive that you’re right about this. The cube approached Dorso, not Jesus.”

“Very true,” said Connolly. “But it approached a Roman senator who just happens to be an impostor who grew up in the same tiny village as Jesus. What are the odds of that? And it shows up just when Jesus is starting to preach love, redemption, and a higher power than Rome.”

“It is hard to imagine that being a coincidence,” agreed Boyd. “Still, we’ve experienced a lot of things that were hard to imagine. *Impossible* to imagine.”

Boyd was about to continue when there was a sharp rap on the arched wooden door and Lucius Sejanus entered the room, closing the door behind him.

“Sejanus just stopped by for a visit,” Boyd informed his two companions, switching to Sage-assisted telepathy. *“You’ll be able to listen in. We can pick up where we left off later.”*

He swallowed hard. *“Assuming I’m still alive when his visit is over,”* he added.

40

Sejanus was the acting emperor and commander of the Praetorian Guard both, used to men prostrating themselves before him, but his usual haughty, superior air had disappeared, replaced by a look of respect, even awe, as he faced Justin Boyd.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, keeping a healthy distance between them.

"Fine," replied Boyd. "No thanks to that love tap of yours," he added in halting Latin. *Nullus amor gratias ictus*.

"Love tap?" said Sejanus in confusion.

"Never mind," replied Boyd.

"I'll have a slave bring you food and drink when we're finished here. Of the highest quality."

Boyd's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Why was Sejanus pretending to be solicitous? "Where are we?" he demanded.

"In a grouping of three villas I own on Esquiline Hill. Where I stay when I'm not at the palace or Castra Praetoria."

Boyd knew from his study of military history that Castra Praetoria was a fortress built on the outskirts of Rome for the Praetorian Guard, under Tiberius's patronage. The ancient military base was over thirty football fields in area and housed between six and ten thousand troops.

"Why am I still alive?" asked the American prisoner.

"Because I believe we can help each other."

"Really," said Boyd. He smiled and shook his head. "If so, we're off to a very bad start."

Sejanus returned the smile, one of the rare times he wore an expression that wasn't a scowl. "Agreed," he said. "But we can remedy that. What is your name?"

"You can call me Boyd."

"Okay, Boyd. First, I have some news to get out of the way. News

you won't like. A few of my cavalrymen on patrol near the bottom of Aventine Hill spotted my horse and followed it to the river. There they saw its rider, who fits the description of Marcus Dorso, dismount and plunge into the water. The men watched the river carefully for some time, including portions downstream, but he never emerged."

The praetor paused. "Which means that your leader is dead, after all, despite your best efforts."

Boyd stared at his visitor as if he were digesting the news.

"Did you hear that, Jim?" he thought quickly. *"Dorso did as you said."*

"Outstanding!" said Connolly's voice through his comm.

Dorso dropping off the radar was great news for the timeline, Boyd realized, but not necessarily for them. They would have to find him and the cube if they ever wanted to get the hell out of this era, a potential needle-in-a-haystack problem in an age with no satellites, cameras, or electronic communications to intercept.

Dorso wasn't just *off* the grid. There *was* no grid.

Sejanus waited a few more seconds for his news to sink in and then continued. "But Dorso's death doesn't mean your efforts were futile," he said. "Because they brought you to my attention. Your fighting skills are extraordinary. I've never seen your equal. You were like the fabled Achilles come to life. I've captured the strongest of men, but not one has ever managed to break an iron chain—and I've seen them try. I've witnessed the fastest runners in the empire. But you're faster. I've seen elite battle-tested warriors in action. But your speed, balance, and decisiveness put them all to shame."

"And your point?" said Boyd.

"I want to sponsor you as a gladiator."

"A gladiator?" repeated Boyd, completely taken aback.

"Yes. The games are entertaining and amuse the masses. They help slaves and peasants forget about their miserable lives. And there can be no doubt that you will go down as the greatest gladiator in history. I could pit you against ten other fighters and know that you'd prevail. If I pitted you against a crocodile or bear, I'd still bet on you."

"Crocodiles and bears?" said Boyd. "I thought you used *lions*."

“We do. We use a wide variety of beasts.”

Boyd shook his head. How had Hollywood failed to bring this bit of interesting and photogenic history to the screen? “So what do *you* get out of this?” he asked. “Money?”

“Money means nothing to me. I get reflected glory. The masses will be in awe of you. There’s a political advantage to having increased . . . popularity. My sponsorship of the greatest gladiator in the empire will help endear me to the population.”

“I see. Useful if you want to be emperor, but don’t have the Caesar name.”

“You may speak slowly and almost unintelligibly, Boyd,” said the regent, “but you aren’t stupid.” He paused. “Speaking of your struggles with Latin, how do you understand every word I say so easily?”

Boyd ignored the question. “So we know what *you* get out of this,” he said. “Popularity. What do I get out of it?”

“You must hail from beyond the empire to even need to ask. You’ll accrue fame almost equal to my own. Men will admire you, and women will want to sleep with you. You’ll become a legend. Your portrait will be on the walls of public facilities. Children will play with clay figures in your likeness. And once you’ve tasted the rewards, and I’ve come to trust you, you’ll have much more freedom. You’ll get the best food and wine, the best quarters. And what I suspect is even more important to you, your woman and her father will be treated equally well.”

Boyd was intrigued. Not that this would ever, or could ever, happen. The greatest gladiator of all time, Spartacus, had lived a hundred years earlier, and was still known in 2027. Last time Boyd had checked his history, Spartacus hadn’t been upstaged by an enhanced American soldier named Justin Boyd, and he intended to keep it that way.

“And if I refuse?” he asked

“Then your woman and her father will be treated . . . less well.”

Boyd had known this would be the answer. He and Kelly did make a formidable team, especially when a cube was present for her to

operate. Otherwise, though, she could be used to make him vulnerable, turned into his Achilles' heel—which seemed to keep happening, over and over.

"Why do you need my cooperation?" said Boyd. "Couldn't you just throw me into the arena and count on my survival instincts to kick in?"

"I could. And if you were a lesser warrior, I would. But I believe you'll remain undefeated for a very long time. So it's better for both of us to become partners instead of adversaries."

Boyd paused, pretending to think the offer over. "I'll do what you ask," he said finally. "But under one condition. We are no longer subject to interrogation."

Sejanus considered. "Agreed," he said finally. "Marcus Dorso is dead, after all, along with all known conspirators. Although once you and I have come to trust each other, I hope you'll decide to tell me what role you played in this. But it will be your choice."

"Then you have yourself a gladiator," said Boyd.

"Good."

"But I need time to recover," added the American, gesturing to the back of his head rather than speaking about his injury specifically, avoiding having to mimic more of Sage's translated Latin.

"You'll have the time you need. I'll be keeping you in chains for a while longer, but these will eventually be removed. When I can trust you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Still," he added, "I wouldn't be entirely surprised if you were able to escape somehow, even now. I wouldn't advise it. You're now in one villa. Both of my other prisoners are a distance away from you in another—in separate rooms. Think of the residence you're in as a vacation home. The one they're in, however, is as much a military garrison as a residence.

"Your friends are both alone in nice bedrooms, but each of the other two rooms serve as sleeping quarters for three handpicked legionnaires. In addition, there is a small barracks structure on both sides of the residence, and behind it, sleeping seven legionnaires each. So twenty-seven in total. I'm sure you've guessed why I've put your

friends in the center of my forces rather than you, even though you're the far greater threat."

Boyd remained silent. He *had* guessed, but he was sure that Sejanus was going to tell him anyway.

"Both residences only have a single entrance in the front," the regent continued, "and these entrances will always be guarded. Another man will be stationed equidistant between the two villas, able to see both. If you get past your guards, he'll have plenty of time to sound the alarm. If this happens, the two people you care about most will pay a very high price. Long before you can fight your way through the many soldiers surrounding them." He paused. "Please keep that in mind."

Boyd shot him an icy glare. "You can count on it," he said ominously.

Sejanus met his prisoner's stare for several long seconds. "Good," he said finally. "Now that we've reached an agreement, I'll be leaving. I'll have food and drink and a change of clothing brought to you shortly. Along with a chamber pot and tersorium, of course."

"What's a tersorium?" Boyd thought at this AI.

"A sponge on a stick," replied Sage helpfully. *"Which Roman's used to wipe their anuses after defecation."*

Boyd nodded at Sejanus, fighting off a grimace. "Thank you," he said. "I can hardly wait."

41

Jim Connolly was in relatively good spirits as he reclined on the bed in the room he'd been given, restrained by a single cuff on his right wrist and an eight-foot chain that allowed him a full range of motion. Sejanus's thumb had torn two of the stitches in his shoulder, but the remainder of Dorso's repair work had held up well, with no sign of infection.

The group of residences they were being held in were truly magnificent, with stately white columns, archway doors, inlaid marble paneling, statues, frescoes, and exquisite paintings. Each had multiple rooms and indoor courtyards and gardens.

He missed his wife and son mightily, but he was delighted to be reunited with Kelly and Justin, regardless of the circumstances. He had missed their playful banter, their sense of humor in the teeth of daunting odds, and their warmth and decency.

Working with a pair that he loved and admired, a pair who possessed immense talent and competence, was also gratifying. And these were the only two people on Earth who had known him as Otto Richter, who had been there when he had transitioned from living a brutal, traumatic life under the Nazis' thumb, to living a joyous life in America.

After Sejanus had left they had spoken for almost seventy minutes, a conversation that was intriguing and mentally stimulating. Not to mention that he had gotten to tease Boyd about being first pick in the gladiator draft, surely the dream of every enhanced American commando. Boyd had countered with Snow White jokes, keeping the conversation light and immensely entertaining.

Not that it wasn't also deadly serious. At some point soon they would need to escape, which, based on what Sejanus had told Boyd about the security setup, wouldn't be easy. After that, Connolly's life depended on them finding Dorso within a month or two. The pills his

friends had both brought would delay his cardiovascular demise, but they wouldn't prevent it. For that he would need surgery, additional medications, and respirocytes, all of which could only be provided in the world of 2027.

It was quite possible that they would never find Dorso again. In that case, not only would Connolly's fate be sealed, but the two people who had risked everything for him would be condemned to live out their lives in Ancient Rome.

Once they escaped, they'd be hunted by countless legionnaires, so they had agreed to stay put for another few days to regroup, plan, and get their bearings. Now that they knew precisely *when* they were, for the past four hours they had each been accessing Sage for their own studies—with Kelly and Justin using thoughts to communicate with the AI, and Connolly whispers.

Sage could easily hold three separate conversations at the same time, which allowed each of them to rapidly explore historical topics of personal interest, mining the AI's bottomless database.

Connolly was focusing on practical matters for the moment. Currency, transportation, and the geography, politics, and culture of the Roman Empire of this time. Knowledge that would be important for them to have as they searched for Marcus Dorso and the cube.

Sage was imparting information into his comm at three times normal speaking speed when there was a tentative knock at his door.

He ordered Sage to halt its delivery. "Come in," he said in Latin.

A man entered with a wooden tray, which held clay plates and bowls filled with fish, vegetables, figs, olives, bread, and a goblet of wine. His dress, timidity, and overall demeanor made it clear that he was a slave, but he wasn't the same man who had attended to Connolly eight hours earlier. Both had been distinctly Roman in appearance, underscoring what Sage had earlier reported, that slavery in the empire wasn't based on race or religion, but was an equal opportunity institution.

The man carefully set the tray down on a small table and glanced nervously back at the closed door. "Are you Connolly?" he asked.

"I am."

The visitor blew out a long breath. “Marcus Dorso sent me to deliver a message,” he said.

Connolly’s eyes widened in surprise. He hadn’t expected to ever hear from Dorso again, but was thrilled to have this confirmation that the man was alive and well.

The slave checked the door again and then removed a tightly rolled piece of parchment from his tunic, handing it to the time traveler. “I can leave this with you for a few hours,” he said, “but then I’ll need to take it back and destroy it. We can’t chance it falling into Sejanus’s hands.”

“I understand,” said Connolly. “What is your name?”

“Call me Casca.”

“Nice to meet you, Casca. Are you an infiltrator? Or one of Sejanus’s slaves?”

“One of Sejanus’s slaves,” he replied.

Interesting, thought Connolly. Given Dorso’s anti-slavery stance, it wasn’t surprising that he would have a secret network of slaves working to help him overthrow the emperor. And it made great tactical and strategic sense for him to put special emphasis on recruiting those operating within the households of Tiberius and Sejanus.

“Where is the senator now?” he asked eagerly.

“I don’t know. And I don’t *want* to know. The less I know, the safer he is. The parchment was funneled to me by a slave from the outside. Perhaps Senator Dorso will disclose his whereabouts in the message,” he added.

“You haven’t read it?”

“I don’t know how to read,” said Casca. “But even if I did, I would never invade the privacy of such a great man.”

Connolly nodded. “Thank you for the delivery,” he said. “I’ll read the senator’s message and hide it until you return.”

The slave exited, and Connolly contacted his companions to tell them what happened. Receiving a message from Dorso in this way was extraordinary, and it meant he had made it to safety. All were eager to learn of its contents.

Connolly unscrolled the parchment with great anticipation. “Rather than read it in Latin and have Sage translate,” he said, “I’ll translate as I go.”

“Perfect,” said Kelly.

Connolly placed the parchment on the bed near the edge of his wool blanket. He would be able to cover it almost immediately if he heard the door opening.

He took a deep breath and rested his eyes on the first line of tiny handwritten text. “Here we go,” he said.

42

Justin Boyd sat chained on a bed, unable to even guess at the contents of a message Marcus Dorso had smuggled to them using a bucket brigade of slaves. Hopefully, it included the senator's whereabouts. If so, they could escape, find him, and be back in 2027 in no time.

"Hello, my friend," began Connolly in English. "Thanks to you and your colleagues for saving my life. I'll never forget this selfless act. Nor will I forget the breathtaking display of fighting prowess that your colleague displayed. When I saw your emotional reunion with this pair, I surmised they were also from the future, but the extraordinary abilities of the man who cleared the path for my escape made this a certainty.

"I also thank you for your sage advice. Everything you told me turned out to be true. The cube was still in the Tiber where I threw it, and it did answer my thoughts. It was also able to free me from my shackles and race me out of sight underwater. Quite an exhilarating and unexpected experience. And I waited until a few cavalrymen were watching before I entered the river. I'm certain they're convinced that I'm dead, and no one will be looking for me. This was a brilliant idea on your part, and I am truly grateful.

"I've already managed to set up a hidden camp and to gather a handful of followers at this site. Tragically, Sejanus has eliminated my few allies in the senate and the upper echelon of society. But he has no idea just how many friends I have in the plebeian and slave classes, and he will never discover them. Because while I see them as trusted allies who will help me change the world, he sees them simply as human filth, unworthy of his attention.

"I'm presently hiding in a dense woods, but I won't provide any further details in case this message is intercepted. I'm taking a risk even revealing that I'm alive. Still, given that you and your friends

saved my life, how could I do anything else. What troubles me most is the necessity of putting the messenger who gave this to you in mortal danger. If you're caught with this parchment, I'm counting on you not to implicate anyone else."

Connolly paused for a moment to reflect on the words he had read so far and then continued.

"I suspect that Sejanus has told you about my past. If he claimed that I'm an impostor, a plebeian, he's correct. But there is a reason I came to Rome. I've long been disgusted by humanity's many barbarisms. The ruthlessness of our species knows no bounds. We wage wars of conquest and kill others for sport. So many of us show a complete disregard for human life. We treat women as property, subjugate our fellow man, disregard human freedoms, and enslave millions. Cruelty and brutality is often more common than compassion. I could fill any number of parchments with a list of human atrocities, but I'll stop here.

"So why did I ignore the station I was born into to come to Rome? Because I was determined to do whatever I could to change things. Even if I was only able to free a single slave, or force better treatment for a single woman, it would be worth it.

"I understand that Sejanus has told others that I staged an attack on Cassius Dorso, so I could *pretend* to rescue him. He also believes I killed Cassius after I was adopted so that I could inherit his wealth. These are both lies. The attack was real, and I did save Cassius's life. He was a great man, and I had nothing to do with his death.

"Even so, his untimely passing did give me the means to impact more people than I imagined I could. You know the rest from there. How I joined the senate and continued working to effect change from a loftier vantage point, and with ever more ambitious goals.

"And I failed. Because of my mistakes, good men were killed. I mourn their loss, and will never forgive myself for what happened.

"But because of you, Connolly, because of your friends, I've reunited with the cube, and I've learned that it gives me the means to accomplish everything I ever wanted, with minimal loss of life. Your strange arrival here caused me to get rid of the object before hearing

it out. But you convinced me to reverse course, to expand my horizons. As you know, it had originally told me that it was sent to me by an intelligence greater than anything present on Earth. I tried to get it to explain further, but it refused, telling me to interpret this in any way I wished. Well, I have now done so, and I no longer fear that I'm mad. If I am, so be it. All I can do is assume that I'm not and use the cube to carry out my dreams.

"So after emerging from the river, I've been exploring the cube's many capabilities and gathering allies. Long ago, I developed a network of slaves to act as spies and messengers. You may be unaware of this, but slaves who have proven their loyalty to their owners, especially those working inside the villas of the wealthy and on public projects, are often left unshackled and given considerable freedom of movement.

"Because of my confidence in this network, I underestimated Sejanus. Having learned of my anti-slavery stance, he must have guessed there were slaves who would warn me if they thought I was in trouble. So he must have maintained strict secrecy while unraveling my plans, and while staging his raid against me and my allies.

"Fortunately, he has no idea just how extensive my network really is. And now that he thinks I'm dead, he no longer cares what his slaves overhear. You'd be amazed at how lax he and other powerful men are when it comes to the presence of slaves during meetings with subordinates and advisors. They're almost unaware they are there, treating them simply as additional furniture in the room.

"So my spies are back in business, and they tell me that you're being treated well, at least for now. That Sejanus intends to press your warrior friend into service as a gladiator, which he may have already done by the time you get this.

"News that you are faring well has come as an immense relief to me. I plan to rescue you and your friends, just as you rescued me. And now I have the means to do this—and so much more.

"I'm learning that the cube's capabilities are extraordinary, and can make me all but unstoppable. Still, I'll ask you to be patient. I'll be monitoring your situation. If you and your friends continue to be

treated well, this will give me more time to learn how to best wield the cube, and to plan, recruit, and strengthen my spy network.

"Rest assured, however, that if your situation takes a turn for the worse, I will act immediately to get the three of you to safety.

"You believed me to be quite important, and I now think you were right. With the help of the cube, I'll be able to assume the role of emperor as I had hoped, and transform the world even more quickly than I had planned. I'll be able to eliminate slavery. Elevate women to the same status as men. Abolish the practice of infant exposure. Ensure that all people are treated equally and humanely, and that the class system is eliminated, allowing even those born into lower classes to excel. I'll be able to stop violence and conquest.

"And yes, I'm aware of the irony that I'll have to use violence to end violence. But given the cube's capabilities, I think I can achieve my ends with very little bloodshed.

"And you, my friend, have made all of this possible."

Connolly stopped to catch his breath and then continued translating Dorso's message.

"Just so you know, since you were so curious, becoming emperor is not what the cube wanted me to do. I know that you urged me to do what it asked. But I can't. Given the opportunity I now have to transform the entire world, what it requested was absurd.

"It has nearly unlimited power, but asks me not to use this power to effect dramatic and much-needed reforms. Instead, it asks me to go back to where I came from. To a backwater province of no importance to the world.

"Once there, it wants me to help a man I know spread a message of love and understanding. A message that will accomplish nothing. It wants me to use its power very sparingly, and only to help garner attention for this message, which it claims will ultimately have a massive impact. The idea is laughable. It isn't that I don't agree with the sentiments it wants me to help spread. I do. But this is the Roman Empire, and spewing pretty words about love, redemption, and pacifism will be a complete waste of time and effort. Words will change nothing. Especially these words. I've learned the hard way that

only bold action will help—which I intend to take.

"I explained this to the cube, but it persisted in its arguments. It may be able to harness incredible power, but it doesn't understand people, and the empire, the way I do. I finally had to order it to stop trying to persuade me so I could get some peace. Thankfully, it does seem willing to obey my every order.

"I will give you a few additional details about what it wanted of me before I end this communication, because I know how much that intrigued you. Specifically, it wanted me to go to the Judean desert, which is where I'm from. A number of preachers there are spreading various messages. It wanted me to take over for one of them. A man named Yohanan, a second cousin of mine, actually, whom I knew well when I left for Rome eight years ago.

"The cube told me that Yohanan has been quite successful in spreading his message, but believes that I am even more articulate, more charismatic, than he is, and will be even more successful. It also believes that he will gladly step aside and let me take the leading role, while he remains as part of my team."

"Hold up, Jim," said Boyd in confusion. "Was Jesus's original name Yohanan?"

"No," said Connolly, sounding troubled. "I'm not fluent in Hebrew, but I do know how Jesus's name evolved through various languages. His actual name was Yeshua, which was fairly common at the time."

A pained expression came over his face. "When Sejanus spoke about a Judean preacher who was getting on Rome's nerves, I was so sure this had to be about Jesus. But maybe not."

"I still think you were probably right," said Kelly.

"Me too," said Boyd. "It's true that the cube wants Dorso to lead a rival ministry. But if it's sending him to Jesus's haunting grounds, how could it be about anything else? But we have to figure out how."

"Maybe this Yohanan would have clashed with Jesus," said Kelly. "Siphoned off followers. Interfered with him somehow. After all, they'd be spreading similar messages. Maybe if Dorso takes over, he'll move the ministry to a more high-profile location and get out of

Jesus's hair. It's clear that Dorso considers Judea to be a backwater province."

"Which it *was*," said Boyd. "Well, I guess I should use present tense. Which it *is*."

"I'm almost at the end of Dorso's letter," said Connolly. "Why don't I finish, and we can continue this discussion afterward."

"Sorry," said Boyd. "Go ahead."

Connolly cleared his throat and continued. "The good news," he read out loud, "is that once I've finished transforming the empire, I will put Yohanan's message into practice. To be honest, I always had a fondness for the man. So, while I won't join his efforts, I do want the best for him. I learned of his activities recently, before the cube came along, and I'm proud of him. His ministry has become quite popular, and I understand that he now goes by the name Yohanan Hamikvah.

"I hope this satisfies your curiosity, Connolly. And I hope you understand why I can't do what the cube is asking of me. I have too many important things to accomplish. So farewell for now. If you are able to speak with your warrior friend, please thank him for me. For saving my life, but also for going out of his way to not take lives in the process, even though it would have been easy, and possibly even prudent, to do so.

"I look forward to seeing you once again when I act to free you. I'd love for you and your friends to join me, of course, but that will be up to you."

Connolly fell silent for several long seconds. "That's all of it," he said. "It's signed, 'your grateful friend, Marcus Dorso.'"

Boyd's mind was reeling as the message came to an end, not having heard a word of it since the mention of Yohanan Hamikvah. At that point he had shot Sage a telepathic inquiry about the name, and it had just finished reporting back.

"Holy shit!" said Boyd. "You've got to be kidding me!" he added. He tried to say more, but his breath caught in his throat, and he felt lightheaded.

"Justin?" said Kelly in alarm. "What's going on?"

"What's going on is this," he said, regaining his voice. "According

to Sage, Yohanan is the Hebrew equivalent of John. *Ha* means *the* in Hebrew. And a mikvah is a Hebrew term for a ritual immersion in water. The Greek equivalent is *baptizo*, which means *to immerse*."

He paused for effect. "So in English," he continued excitedly, "Yohanan Hamikvah translates into *John the Baptist*. And John the Baptist *did* have a growing following. And his ministry *was* taken over by another and expanded."

Boyd waited for his companions to jump to the obvious conclusion and was surprised when they didn't.

"Let me spell it out for you," he continued, his tone taking on an awestruck quality. "The cube doesn't want Marcus Dorso to *help* Jesus Christ. And it doesn't want Marcus Dorso to *influence* Jesus Christ."

Boyd hesitated, finding it difficult to get his mind around the words he was about to utter.

"Because Marcus Dorso *is* Jesus Christ."

PART 7

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

—Albert Einstein

43

Lucius Sejanus patted the magnificent white steed he was riding as it charged back toward his primary villa, enraged that Marcus Dorso had had the audacity to ride her. If Dorso had raped his sister, this could be forgiven. But a violation of the sanctity of his horse could not be.

As he approached his cluster of villas he noted Centurion Vetus waiting for him with a slave. He halted his horse in front of the two men and stared down at them with a sneer.

He was well aware of how physically intimidating he was to begin with, but sitting on his perch atop a magnificent equine specimen magnified the effect many fold.

"What is it?" he snapped at the centurion.

"This slave says he has vital news, and insisted that he be brought to you. My men brought him to me first. I heard him out and decided that it would be worth a few minutes of your time."

Sejanus studied the slave, who had his eyes lowered to the ground, cowering. The man was either very brave, or very stupid, a mouse insisting that he be brought into the den of a hungry lion.

"*Servi publici* or *servi privati*?" he bellowed at the cowering man, asking if he was privately owned, or owned by the government of Rome, which put countless slaves to work on any number of public projects.

"*Servi publici*, esteemed regent," he rasped, his tone terrified and his eyes glued to the ground.

"By what audacity do you demand to see the regent himself?"

"I have. . . information . . . which I'm sure . . . will interest you, sir," he managed to spit out, gasping for air as if a boa were constricting his neck. "If you find it worthwhile, I ask that you . . . set me free. And . . . and provide a modest financial reward. If you find it wanting, esteemed regent, punish me . . . or kill me. As you see fit."

Sejanus's eyes narrowed. This was a bold move, an indication of

the man's confidence that he had something of great value to offer.

"Agreed," he said, deciding he had nothing to lose by hearing him out.

"Thank you, sir," said the slave in relief, breathing almost normally now, obviously not having been certain that his head would still be sitting on his neck after his proposal had been delivered.

"What is your information?"

"A slave I work with ran away yesterday, just before dawn. I noticed and took it upon myself to follow."

"Why did you do that?" said Sejanus.

"I overheard him tell another slave, new to our project, that he intended to join Marcus Dorso, and devote his life to helping him."

"Are you saying you've heard of this Marcus Dorso?" asked the regent.

"Just recently, sir. Word of how you bravely put down a treasonous conspiracy against Rome has traveled fast. And Dorso was at the center of the plot."

Sejanus was already disappointed. The only way anyone could join Dorso would be in the afterlife. Still, he would give the man another few minutes. "So you were curious," he prompted.

"Yes, Great Regent, I was. This slave had also spoken out previously against slaves who dared to run away. He believed they did nothing but seal their own deaths and ensure their fellow slaves were punished."

"I see," said Sejanus. "So something had to have happened important enough to get him to change his mind."

"That is what I wanted to learn, sir. He traveled for almost three hours, running for about half of this time. I was able to keep up, following from a distance and staying out of sight. He traveled to the northeast, and entered a woods. One of dozens in the area, but one whose location I remember precisely. And there he did meet up with a small group. The leader of this group matched Dorso's description perfectly, and was called senator by several of the men."

Sejanus frowned. How could Dorso still be alive? The legionnaires who had seen him throw himself into the Tiber had been certain he

had never emerged. Still, they hadn't seen a body, so this was worth exploring further.

"You're certain of this information?" said Sejanus.

"I am, sir," he replied, his eyes still down. "But there's more. I hid behind trees and watched for almost an hour. He had a small white cube with him. I will gladly tell you what I saw then, but you won't believe me. So I beg you to send your own spies to see for themselves. So you'll know I'm telling the truth."

"Tell me what you saw," said Sejanus from his high perch. "And know that you were right to come to me. If your information checks out, you'll have your freedom. And your compensation."

He paused. "If it fails to check out?" he added with a sneer. "Then I'll need to make an example of you. So others know not to waste my time. Just how you'll be punished, the mutilations I have planned, I'll leave to your potent imagination."

44

Kelly sat alone on a small bed, just as her two fellow time travelers were doing in similar rooms elsewhere, and shook her head as if to clear it. Surely she hadn't heard right. Had her husband really said that the man who had been a prisoner, the man he had freed, was Jesus Christ?

It was preposterous.

If true, this meant that they had had run-ins with both Adolf Hitler and Jesus Christ. This defied all odds. How had they come to be so integrally involved with two figures of this immense historical importance at such pivotal times? She couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"Justin, could you walk us through your logic?" she said. "What makes you so convinced that Marcus Dorso is Jesus Christ?"

Boyd smiled. "It's clear that neither you nor Jim know the story of Jesus and John the Baptist," he said through her comm.

"Neither of us were raised Christian," she said.

"Yeah, I know that. I guess I always thought it was common knowledge."

"Maybe it is," said Kelly. "But I guess my grandfather and I aren't . . . common."

Boyd laughed. "That's for sure," he said. "I had a Christian education, but I never believed much of it. If I had known I'd be traveling to the time of Christ, I would have paid more attention."

"Yeah, no kidding," said Connolly.

"So here's the story in a nutshell," began Boyd. "John the Baptist started a ministry in Judea, and was fairly successful. His and Jesus's messages were similar in some ways. He was big on repentance, which meant acknowledging past sins and making amends. Basically, he asked his followers to share with the poor and to be decent, caring people. And, as you might imagine from his name, he was big on doing ritual immersions, baptisms."

He paused. "What's so startling in the context of the cube," he

continued, “is that scripture indicates that Jesus’s first team-up with John was of vital importance. In fact, it marked the very beginning of Jesus’s public ministry. So what the cube asked Dorso to do was arguably the catalyst that started it all. The exact instant that Jesus emerges center stage, and becomes the Jesus of history and scripture.

“Specifically, his ministry begins when he comes to John and asks to be baptized, an event that becomes a defining moment in the Bible. Perhaps *the* defining moment. His coming out party. Sage, correct me if I start getting things too far wrong, but the gist of it was that John was in awe of Jesus, and wanted to be baptized by him. But Jesus insisted on the reverse. For a while before this, John had presaged the coming of Jesus, so this was a huge deal.

“In the current context, one can imagine Dorso going to John as the cube asked. Changing his name back to Yeshua and convincing John that he should be transitioned in as leader of his cousin’s ministry. But then John convincing Dorso that he should wait for a public unveiling. That the transition would be more epic if he gave John time to herald his coming.”

Kelly found this fascinating. She had known John the Baptist was an important figure in Christianity, of course, but had no idea that he had handed his ministry off to Jesus in this way. “And John was really Jesus’s second cousin?” she asked.

“To be honest,” replied Boyd, “I hadn’t heard that.” He paused. “Sage, can you shed any light on this subject?”

“I can,” replied the AI immediately. *“In the Book of Luke, John’s mother, Elizabeth, is described as being one of Mary’s relatives. But the relevant passages never specify exactly how the two are related. It’s possible Elizabeth was Mary’s aunt, but most biblical scholars believe they were cousins.”*

Boyd smiled. “I’ll be damned,” he said excitedly. “It all hangs together even better than I thought. And there’s more. Because Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, where John typically performed these ceremonies. In the same country where the cube was found.”

“Not just in the same country,” said Connolly. “Less than ten miles from the Jordan River itself.”

“How did I miss that?” said Boyd. “I was flown to and from the cube’s location by helicopter, and I never saw a river.”

“Not surprising,” said Connolly. “You wouldn’t unless you were right on top of it. I saw it on my way to the cube, but only because I traveled by jeep and had to cross it. It’s very narrow in general, and well concealed. The desert terrain that surrounds it seems primeval, being right next to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth’s surface, more than a thousand feet below Sea Level. The river runs through a ten-mile-wide stretch of desert flanked on two sides by walls of cliffs, and is bounded by a canyon of its own.”

He paused. “Sage, can you give us its average width?”

“It varies,” replied the AI, *“depending on the season and era. But it isn’t surprising that Justin missed it. At times it’s almost entirely dry in places. On occasion, John the Baptist reportedly had to hunt for stretches of the river where there was enough water to perform his ceremonies.”*

“We both missed the significance of the cube’s location,” said Connolly. “If I’d have found it in Bethlehem or Nazareth, it would have screamed Jesus Christ. But the Jordan River meant nothing to me. You might have made the connection if you had seen the river, but you didn’t.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Kelly. “Let’s back up. This is stunning stuff. It is. And compelling. Except for one minor detail. History doesn’t record that Jesus was a senator in Rome. That he tried to overthrow the emperor. It’s preposterous. I’ve never claimed to know anything about religion. But even *I* know that Jesus was never a Roman senator for Christ’s sa—”

Kelly threw on the verbal brakes mid-word.

“You weren’t really about to say, ‘For Christ’s Sake,’ were you?” asked Boyd in amusement.

“Okay, poor choice of phrase,” said Kelly with a sheepish grin. “But the point remains.”

“But it *doesn’t,*” said Boyd. “I mean—*shockingly*—it doesn’t. You’re right, history makes no mention of Jesus having once been a Roman senator named Marcus Dorso. Because it makes no mention of *anything* he did as an adult prior to his baptism. Nor does scripture. And when I

tell you it says nothing, I mean *absolutely* nothing."

Kelly shook her head in disbelief. "That can't be true," she said.

"But it *is*," insisted Boyd. "Even many who were raised Christian would be surprised," he added. "They're taught what is known about Jesus—not what *isn't* known. But from the time Jesus was about twelve, to the time he was about thirty, there isn't a single word written about him. Not one. These seventeen or eighteen years are called the Unknown Years, or Lost Years."

"I can imagine *history* losing track of him like this," said Connolly, "but not scripture. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely positive. There have been any number of theories about what he was up to during these years, but all are speculation. Sage, can you give us a few examples."

"Of course," said the AI. *"There are Arthurian legends that place Jesus in Britain, tying his presence in with Holy Grail mythology. Other theorists claim there is circumstantial evidence that Jesus spent over a decade in India, Nepal, and Tibet—as both a student and a teacher."*

"Pretty wild, isn't it?" said Boyd. "Bottom line, there is zero evidence that Jesus *was not* a filthy rich Roman senator who called himself Marcus Dorso. For all we know, he spent these lost years on the planet Vulcan communing with Mr. Spock."

Connolly's mouth dropped open. "I'm touched by the *Star Trek* reference, Justin," he said. "I can't believe you went to the effort of looking up a nineteen-sixties show, just because I mentioned it in my message."

"Right," said Boyd in amusement. "That's exactly what I did. Because how else could I possibly know about Mr. Spock?"

Kelly barely managed not to laugh. "Okay," she said, "let's stipulate that Jesus was in Rome during the last eight of his lost years. That he was adopted by a wealthy man, changed his name to Marcus Dorso, and became a senator. But this has made him pretty well known around these parts. I mean, he was a high-profile politician and aristocrat living right under the emperor's nose."

"Not really," said Connolly in disgust. "Because at the time, the emperor was on the Island of Capri, leaving Sejanus largely in charge.

Tiberius was doing little more than having his private parts nibbled on by young boys as he swam."

"What?" said Kelly.

"Never mind. Go on."

Kelly decided it was good that her grandfather didn't answer, since she really didn't want to know the full extent of the emperor's depravities.

"Okay," she said. "So Tiberius wasn't paying attention. But Sejanus was. So when Jesus made his big splash," she continued, "wouldn't Sejanus and others recognize who he really was? It's like Clark Kent and Superman. How could people *not* notice?"

"They wouldn't," said Boyd, "because Dorso is clean cut, like all Romans of this time. But when he returns to Judea, he'll grow a beard, in accordance with Jewish custom. At least his face will be disguised, unlike Superman. But even if not, Sejanus and other higher-ups in Rome wouldn't be caught dead in Judea. They considered it a backwater desert wasteland. With no air-conditioning."

"Yeah," said Kelly thoughtfully, "that might explain it. But one last point. Dorso may be strikingly good-looking, but he has a swarthy Mediterranean skin tone and black hair."

"Don't be thrown off by paintings and Hollywood," said Boyd. "Most scholars think this is exactly how he'd appear. He was born in Judea after all, so why would he be the only one there to have blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes?"

"You make a compelling case," said Connolly. "And I had the chance to interact with him at length. He didn't believe in the Roman pantheon of gods. He didn't tell me he believed in the Jewish God, but this was likely because he feared such a disclosure would give his origins away. And he was wildly magnetic. More so than anyone I've ever been around. I'm still convinced he's just a man, but an extremely impressive one, brilliant and compassionate."

He paused. "Justin, did history or the Bible mention him as being wildly charismatic?"

"Not in those words, but he's described as a total rock star. Standing room only wherever he went. And able to attract passionate

followers willing to give up their former lives almost instantly to join him."

"Yeah, sounds like Marcus, all right," said Connolly. "And look at what he's been trying to accomplish in Rome. He's dedicated himself to improving humanity. He already agrees with the message the cube wants him to preach. He just thinks it will be ineffective. Especially now that he can change things by edict. Sejanus believed he was too good to be true. Too chaste. Too upstanding. I found him thoughtful and kind. He stayed with me when I passed out, putting his life on the line. In short, he seemed to be a remarkably good man."

"But still not a god," said Kelly.

"No, still not a god. I don't believe Jesus was divine. But I won't rule it out, either. And if anyone ever could be, it would definitely be Marcus Dorso. The cube chose exceedingly well."

"So was the cube always an unknown part of his story?" said Kelly. "It could explain how he was able to walk on water," she added. "But it still wouldn't explain other miracles attributed to him."

"It might," said Boyd. "Maybe he did the walk on water thing, and these other feats were exaggerations that were passed down for decades before his story was ever put to paper."

"I think you mean parchment," said Kelly with a smile.

"Right," said Boyd. "But even if the cube *was* involved," he added, "no one knew of this involvement. So it wouldn't matter at all to the timeline. Regardless of whether Jesus was divine, human, or alien inspired, it wouldn't change his impact on the future one iota. And to be fair, there are a number of Christian scholars who believe that Jesus never claimed to be divine in the first place."

"That's not how I heard it," said Kelly. "But before you explain, I should take a pause to congratulate the two of you. Countless men and women over thousands of years have credited Jesus for saving their lives. But the two of you saved *Jesus's* life. Now if that isn't something to tell our grandchildren about, nothing is."

"Sure," said Boyd. "I'll tell them all about it, right after I tell them how I let Adolf Hitler live when I had the chance to kill him."

Kelly sighed. "I am willing to admit that our lives may have

veered off into the absurd," she said with a wry smile. "You know, just a little."

45

There was a long silence as the trio each sat on their respective beds and considered just how far down the rabbit hole they had recently plunged.

“How does this keep happening?” said Boyd.

“I don’t know,” replied Kelly, “but it’s insane. With all due humility, in a bizarre way, we’ve become as pivotal in human history as anyone ever. Not because of our own accomplishments, but because we’ve somehow found ourselves in a position to impact the most consequential figures of all time.”

“And that’s only the half of it,” noted Connolly. “Literally. As you said, we’ve found ourselves at critical tipping points in history, in a position to have an immense impact on the timeline. But we’re also in a position to have an equally immense impact on the future of humanity beyond 2027. Assuming I’m able to join you in your own time, the three of us will control both cubes on Earth. We’ll be responsible for making sure they are used for good, not ill. And for solving the technology. Putting us in position to pave a brilliant new technological future for our species.”

Kelly blew out a long breath. He was right. Their role was even more pivotal than she had thought—which was really saying something. It was all so daunting, so mind-blowing, so utterly preposterous. It was as if someone was rolling a dice with infinite faces, and it kept coming up Otto, Kelly, and Justin.

“I get why *you’re* so important, Jim,” she said. “You’re the greatest scientific genius in history. But why do Justin and I keep ending up at the epicenter of so many tectonic shifts? We aren’t that special. Not special enough to be slated for *this*.”

“Who’s to say?” replied Connolly. “Don’t sell yourself short. Marcus Dorso is humble and unassuming, too. I’m sure he never thought of himself as all that special, either. At least not special enough for what *he’s* being slated for.”

Kelly nodded. “I suppose you’re right,” she said. “And it also gets us back to what Justin was saying. That Jesus, himself, didn’t think he was a god. Although I’ve heard otherwise.”

“I’m sure you have,” said Boyd. “Obviously, it isn’t a settled question. And any discussion of one side of the argument leaves out a vast literature coming down on the other side. Scholars have dissected every word in the Bible for thousands of years, and millions of man-hours. There are many passages that are ambiguous, and much of the record requires considerable interpretation and imagination. I’ll have Sage summarize the evidence that I’m referring to. Obviously, this will be an oversimplification, and the finer points could be argued for eternity.”

He paused. “Sage, you have the floor.”

“Thank you, Justin,” replied the AI. *“Religious knowledge of Jesus Christ comes from five principle written sources. The earliest of these are a number of letters penned by Paul—who didn’t know Jesus personally—twenty to thirty years after Jesus’s death. The remainder come much later, from the Gospels of the New Testament. These were four books written anonymously forty to sixty years after Jesus’s death. None of the authors knew Jesus, lived in Judea, or spoke his language.*

“These anonymous works were circulated for decades before they were finally given titles, each taken from the names of men with links to Jesus, confusing many into thinking that these were the actual authors. Specifically, these anonymous works became known as the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

“Most theologians pull different passages from different books to make their points, and don’t treat them as separate works, written at different times. But because they are, and because the authors didn’t know Jesus, there are any number of significant conflicting accounts between them. This is inevitable since none of them were written by eyewitnesses. The information came from the oral tradition, from stories handed down for decades, since no one took careful notes of what Jesus said at the time he said it.

“In four of these five accounts, Jesus never calls himself god or considers himself god. Nor do any of his disciples.”

The AI paused for effect. *"He and his followers did claim that he was the messiah, however. In fact, Christ is the Latin translation of the Hebrew word for messiah. But at the time of Christ, the messiah wasn't considered a divine figure. Rather, this term simply referred to a great leader, in King David's line, who would rule the Jewish people with God's blessing, a role Jesus believed he would fulfill. And passages of the New Testament do, indeed, refer to him as* King of the Jews*."*

"Fascinating," said Kelly. "But you said there were no claims of divinity in *four* of the five accounts. What about the fifth?"

"The fifth account was the Gospel of John, the very last one, written more than sixty years after Jesus's death. In this one, Jesus does describe himself as a god—on par with his father. When it was written, Romans had started calling their emperors gods, which could explain why the anonymous author had Jesus ascribing this status to himself. Regardless, had Jesus ever claimed to be on par with God, or to be the Son of God, this would have been the most important statement he ever made. If he had made this claim, many scholars find it highly unlikely that none of the four other written sources—earlier sources—would have contained a single mention of it."

Sage paused once again. *"To be fair, highly unlikely doesn't mean impossible,"* it continued. *"And even if Jesus never did claim to be a god, this doesn't mean he wasn't. Or didn't become one. Many have interpreted the scripture to suggest that Jesus was either a human or angel on Earth, and that because of his service, his sacrifice, God rewarded him by exalting him to the level of a god. But only after his death."*

No one spoke for several seconds as they pondered this information.

"Assuming God exists," said Connolly finally, "and assuming that Jesus was the Son of God, it makes a lot of sense to me that God wouldn't reveal this to him while he was on Earth. A lot of sense."

"Wait a minute," said Boyd. "Are you really suggesting it's possible that Jesus is God, despite what Sage just said?"

"I am," said Connolly.

"Even given the cube's involvement?"

"I'm not saying I believe Marcus Dorso is divine," replied

Connolly. “I’m just saying that it’s possible. And yes, even given the cube’s involvement.”

He paused. “Imagine there’s a single creator of the universe. We say that he created humanity in his own image, but why be so limiting? Our horizons have expanded in every other regard, so why not this one? Why couldn’t a god be a creator of countless intelligences throughout the universe? And all could be created in one facet of his image, since this image is bound to be infinitely faceted.

“But even if humans aren’t as special as we originally thought, as a sentient species, we’re still extraordinarily special. And we’ve become used to getting knocked down a peg or two when it comes to our place in the universe. Let me list the ways. Even the most religious among us have come to accept that the Earth isn’t the center of the solar system, the sun is. And our solar system is just one of possibly billions of solar systems. And we aren’t located in the center of the galaxy, either, but on a backwater spiral arm.”

Connolly paused. “And our Milky Way Galaxy,” he continued, “which was originally thought to be the entire universe, is but one of hundreds of billions of galaxies. And instead of creation taking place only thousands of years ago, it took place billions of years ago. And instead of our species starting out as full-fledged human beings, we evolved very slowly from lesser species.”

“That’s quite a list,” said Kelly. “I’d say humanity’s place in the cosmos has been knocked down by more than a peg or two.”

“No doubt,” said Connolly. “But if you believe in God, wouldn’t the vast scale of the cosmos demonstrate his greatness all the more? I’m more inclined to believe in God *because* of our insignificance next to nature, rather than because we’re so special.”

He let this sink in and then continued. “So imagine a creator. The same omniscient God depicted in the Bible, except expanding his act of creation to encompass extraterrestrials also, including those who developed the Enigma Cube. If this creator wanted to influence humanity in mysterious ways, he could have used the cube to do it. Why not?”

He paused to let this sink in. “And back to my original point,” he

continued, “if Jesus is a direct offshoot of the Creator, a god in his own right, it makes sense that the Creator wouldn’t tell him that. Knowing he was a god would render Jesus’s sacrifices meaningless.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Kelly. “Reminds me of Superman again. When he stands in front of an armed gunman who sprays bullets at his chest, he isn’t being courageous. He isn’t making a potential sacrifice. Because he knows he can’t be hurt. True courage is being scared out of your mind, having everything to lose, and acting anyway.”

“Exactly,” said Connolly. “So it makes sense that even if Dorso were a god, God would erase this memory, so that his efforts and sacrifices on Earth would be meaningful. He’d owe him that.”

Boyd shook his head in wonder. “I can’t believe that an agnostic is working so hard to explain how Jesus could be divine, even though he never claimed to be. You must have been *very* impressed with Marcus Dorso.”

“I was. But that isn’t why I’m making these arguments. It’s an exercise in being open-minded to all possibilities. And after seeing the cube, thinking about the enormity and impossibility of the cosmos, the reality of divinity isn’t any more far-fetched than anything else.”

Kelly found herself stunned by this statement. As usual, her grandfather’s thinking was far ahead of his time. “You’ve basically just restated what is called the fine-tuned universe argument for the existence of God,” she said. “It turns out that a large number of physical constants need to be almost exactly what they are for the universe to work, and life to be possible. If a proton was just one percent heavier, for instance, atoms would be unstable and fly apart. The fact that all of these forces and constants turn out to be in such exquisite balance is almost infinitely unlikely. Like winning the lottery a thousand times in a row.”

Kelly paused. “Theologians seize on this as proof of the existence of God,” she continued. “Scientists explain it by positing an infinite number of infinite universes. If you have an infinite number of universes, one is bound to be lucky enough to get it right.”

“And we just happen to be inside this lucky universe,” said Boyd.

“Is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s what the *theory* is saying,” said Kelly. “I, personally, remain skeptical. As much as I find the idea of a creator impossible to believe, I find the concept of infinite universes even more impossible. So I may be agnostic, but I’m more open-minded than ever.”

“Interesting,” said Boyd. “But while we’re being so open-minded, let’s circle back to this alien involvement idea. Have we reached any conclusions about the cube’s role in Jesus’s life? What are the odds that Jesus would have become the Jesus we know without its involvement?”

Connolly blew out a heavy breath. “After meeting the man,” he replied, “I’d say the odds are pretty close to zero.”

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Boyd frowned. He found the assertion that aliens almost certainly influenced Jesus very troubling. Still, Connolly had already made the point that the cube's involvement didn't rule out Jesus's divinity. Nor did it change the impact he had on the world.

"How can you be so certain?" he asked.

"I can't be," said Connolly. "But I also can't imagine Dorso deciding to join his cousin on his own. Ever. Not without a strong push from the cube. You heard what he wrote in his letter. He thinks preaching is nearly useless when it comes to effecting significant change. Especially preaching that originates from the Judean province."

"Even though I think of myself as agnostic," said Boyd, "the idea that aliens are entirely responsible for creating the Jesus we know bothers the hell out of me."

"I get that," said Connolly. "But I thought you agreed that the cube's actions could have been at the behest of God. Besides, the cube wasn't entirely responsible for persuading Jesus to become the Jesus we know. It had a lot of help."

"From whom?"

"From *us*," said Connolly. "I'm convinced we played a critical role. That we're somehow part of a self-recursive loop in time."

"Based on what?" said Boyd.

"I think the cube's arguments were always destined to fail," said Connolly. "And that we've always been the ones who persuaded Jesus to attempt to change humanity in a more passive manner."

"But that makes no sense," said Kelly. "You're pretty sure you were killed trying to set Dorso free the first time around. Which is why you didn't show up in 2027. So the cube must have eventually found a way to convince him to assume his role."

"I don't think so," said Connolly. "I was determined to save Dorso's life. And I decided that if I did, I'd try to get him to promise to do whatever the cube asked of him. Solemn oath kind of thing. Which

I think is what happened the first time around. He did make this promise to me. And he's a man of his word. So I think he kept this vow, despite how tempted he might have been to do otherwise."

Boyd nodded slowly. "But this time Kelly and I showed up," he said. "So he never made the promise in the first place."

"Exactly. And based on his letter, the cube failed to persuade him."

"So instead of rushing off to take over for his cousin John," said Kelly, "he's in the woods playing Robin Hood."

"Except he isn't practicing his archery," said Boyd. "He's practicing his manipulation of the fabric of spacetime."

"Right," said Kelly, "on his way to becoming Terminator Jesus."

She shook her head in disbelief. "So now it's our job to persuade him to become the Jesus we know from history. Of course it is. Just another day at the office, right?"

"What if we decide *not* to persuade him?" said Boyd. "Who's to say the outcome from history is optimal? Maybe the world would be better off if he had never started preaching. Not through any fault of his own, mind you, but the fault of those who came later, who twisted his words."

"I had the same thoughts," said Connolly. "When I first realized what this was all about. I weighed the positive and negative impacts Christianity has had on history. In the end it was close. I couldn't decide if it was a net negative, or a net positive. But then again, I know very little about religion or history. So it's worth thinking this through again now that we have Sage as the ultimate historical resource."

"I agree," said Boyd. "Not just worth it, but vital. It's become easy to blame the church for many of the ills of the world, and argue that it's blocked rational thought and progress, while not giving it any credit for the good it's done. I read an article about why this might be a few years back."

"What did it say was the culprit?" asked Kelly.

"Basically, lack of context," replied Boyd. "Fewer and fewer of us are learning history, and even fewer are putting it into perspective.

We've begun to judge the actions of those in the past based on our own standards. In our day, waterboarding prisoners is considered despicable and inhumane. Many would immediately condemn a man who advocated for this practice a thousand years ago, without considering the context. But if the common practice at the time was to skin prisoners alive, this same man looks more like a humanitarian than a villain."

Connolly nodded. "Good point. Fortunately, when it comes to supplying the proper historical context, Sage is the right AI for the job."

"I agree," said Kelly. "But regardless, the question of whether Dorso should preach or not isn't necessarily the one we need to ask. It's whether he should preach, or basically rule the world. What does the future look like if he uses the power of the cube to fundamentally transform Ancient Rome?"

"Good question," said Connolly.

"Which begs additional questions," said Kelly. "Are we really willing to wipe out the future that we knew entirely, including our friends and loved ones, trapping us here forever? Which would also mean we'd fail in our mission to bring you back to 2027, just when your intellect could do the most good. When you would have the tools you need to make any number of stunning scientific discoveries."

She paused to let this sink in. "So are we really prepared to encourage Dorso to abandon his ministry and become emperor? To change the timeline this dramatically?"

"We'd have to be pretty damned convinced humanity would be better served by doing so," said Boyd.

"Which could well be the case," said Connolly. "Dorso sees this as the chance to achieve his goals with blinding speed, despite the bloodshed required. Which he did mention he believes he can minimize. And he would be able to introduce dramatic changes that most of the world hasn't even implemented in modern times."

He paused. "Imagine an exceedingly virtuous man ruling the ancient world. One who is divine, or as close as we've seen, and incorruptible. Imagine what good he could do. The human race might

be able to get through our barbaric adolescence in record time. Our species could become more mature in hundreds of years than we *ever* became in our current timeline, with quality of life and technology to match. And we could avoid all the Hitlers and Stalins along the way."

"That's a best-case scenario," said Boyd. "But I can imagine a pretty horrific worst case scenario as well."

"Also something that needs thorough consideration," said Kelly grimly.

After a long silence, she continued. "But skipping ahead for a moment, what if, after thinking this through, we decide that Jesus *should* become the Jesus we know? What then? Would we tell him of the future? The good and bad both?"

"I think we'd need to be honest," said Connolly. "He's too shrewd for anything else. And he deserves it."

"Would that include telling him that he only lives for about three years after he starts his ministry?" asked Boyd. "And that he dies horribly?"

Connolly sighed. "I think so, yes," he replied. "But it's worse than that. In addition to describing how he gets killed, we'd have to convince him to *let it happen*. To not use the cube to prevent it."

"Maybe extending his life would improve how things turn out," said Boyd.

"Maybe," said Connolly. "But I don't think so. I don't know much about Christianity, but I'm pretty sure that for it to take root, he had to die when and how he did. The tragic, untimely nature of his death, and its brutality, sent a powerful message. Correct me if I'm wrong, Justin, but the dying-for-our-sins and being-resurrected part of his story is pretty important."

Boyd sighed. "You aren't wrong," he said miserably.

"So what if we *can't* convince him to assume his historical role?" said Kelly. "What then? I guess then we'd just have to force him, right?" she added, rolling her eyes. "You know, wage a telepathic duel for control of the cube. Go to war with Jesus Christ for Christ's sake. And yes, that time I said it on purpose."

"Sure," said Boyd, shaking his head. "Because it isn't horrible

enough that we let Hitler live. Now we have to convince Jesus to let himself be killed. Or else go to battle against him. I don't know about you, but that's always been my dream. You know, along with being top pick in the gladiator games."

"You guys are just being dramatic, right?" said Connolly. "You do know that *forcing* Jesus to become Jesus isn't really an option."

"Of course," said Boyd. "But you do have to love the irony. Trying to force someone at gunpoint to preach peace and love does make for a good visual. You know, if we had guns."

Connolly smiled. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure we'll need him to embrace this path of his own free will," he said. "So if we do decide this is truly the best course for the future, we'll just have to find a way to be persuasive."

"What could be easier than that?" said Kelly with a wry smile. "The case practically makes itself. Here are your choices Marcus. You can rule the world, and transform it to a compassionate heaven on earth. Or, door number two, you can change your name back to Yeshua, join your cousin, see nothing improve in your lifetime, and die horribly in three years."

Connolly sighed. "That about sums it up," he said. "Although, not to be a critic, Kelly," he added with a smile, "but I think you could probably make a more compelling case." He held his thumb and forefinger a centimeter apart, even though they couldn't see him. "You know, just a tiny bit."

"Regardless of our decision," said Boyd, "we need to find a way to reunite with the man. Or, you know, whatever he turns out to be."

"He is planning to rescue us," said Kelly. "Why don't we just wait for that?"

"It's tempting," said Boyd. "But he and the cube won't be coming alone. He'll have a plan, and bring followers. So Sejanus could end up dead. Accidentally or otherwise."

"Good point," said Connolly. "As despicable as Sejanus is, he's a key figure in history. It's impossible to say what impact his early death might have. Maybe it would result in Tiberius no longer choosing Caligula as his successor, for example."

“Caligula was his successor?” said Kelly.

“Yep,” replied her grandfather. “Who knew? Anyway, Justin’s right. We can’t chance that Sejanus will be killed. Or that Dorso will flaunt the cube’s powers a little too much.”

“Wouldn’t the world be better off if Caligula never did become emperor?” asked Kelly.

“Maybe,” said Boyd. “But maybe not. You could ask the same question about Hitler dying in 1943. Sounds great on paper, but might actually make things worse.”

Kelly sighed. “You’re right, of course,” she said. “But another thought just occurred to me. Right now, Dorso is pristine. But he’s at a fork in the road. On one path he remains a pacifistic, anti-bloodshed, turn-the-other-cheek kind of guy. On the other he’s forced to become more militant and warlike to achieve his goals, no matter how peaceful these goals are. So if we let him lead a daring raid to free us, we set him firmly down this second path. Irreversibly. We may ultimately decide that this path is better for the world. But until we sort it out, let’s keep him pure and peaceful.”

“Amen to that,” said Boyd. “So we need to find out where he is and join him. Before he tries to free us. In the meanwhile, we can bone up on Christianity’s impact on the timeline, so we can decide which path is the most beneficial.”

“Speaking of which,” said Kelly. “I’m never time traveling again. *Never*. I don’t care what’s at stake. Time travel logic is a nightmare. And constantly having to agonize about the possible fate of the timeline is a colossal pain in the ass.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Boyd. “That’s exactly what it is, a colossal pain in the ass.” He shook his head. “You scientists sure do have an elegant way of putting things,” he added with a grin.

47

The time travelers concluded their discussion and all three began to busily access Sage to research the impact of Christianity on the world. Less than ten minutes later, Jim Connolly heard a soft, respectful knock on his door.

The slave who called himself Casca entered for a second time, closed the door behind him, and approached the prisoner. Sage had already been instructed to alert Kelly and Justin when the slave reappeared, and to make sure they could hear what was being said.

Connolly reached under his blanket and retrieved the parchment he'd been given, now tightly rolled up once again. "Thank you for this," he said as he handed it back to the slave. "It was extremely . . . eye opening."

"That's good to hear," said Casca, placing the parchment carefully inside an outer pocket in his tunic. "I'll destroy it personally," he added, lifting the wooden service tray he had delivered earlier from the small table it was on.

"Don't go just yet," said Connolly, gesturing for him to set the tray back down. "I have an important favor to ask. I need to know where Marcus Dorso is hiding. I need you to find out from his network of slaves."

"I'm sorry," said Casca. "But I can't do that. The senator trusts you, but neither of us should have this information. That way, we can't be tortured to reveal it."

"I understand," said Connolly. "And under normal circumstances, I'd agree with you. But his message indicates that he intends to come here to rescue me and my friends."

"What?" said Casca in alarm. "Are you sure? He's a great man, but he's no warrior."

"Exactly. So we can't let him do this. It's too dangerous."

The slave frowned deeply. “Agreed,” he said. “But don’t worry. I can send word to him that you asked him not to come.”

“Believe me, that won’t deter him. The only way to stop him is for me to escape before he makes the attempt. Which is exactly what my friends and I intend to do. Escape and then join him where *he* is.”

Casca shook his head. “Escape is impossible,” he said. “Not without a large outside force. Sejanus has kept any number of high-value prisoners here over the years, for as long as several weeks. None have ever escaped.”

“That’s about to change,” said Connolly. “I’m guessing you’ve heard about the other male prisoner being held here.”

Casca nodded. “*Everyone* has. Rumor has it that he’s the greatest warrior who ever lived. That he broke the chain of his shackles and then, unarmed and wearing a simple tunic, he defeated scores of elite, armed praetorians. That he moved in ways that no one has seen before, and more quickly than seemed humanly possible.”

“These aren’t just rumors.”

“Even so,” said the slave, “he’s now bound by chains that are thicker than usual. And you and the female prisoner, who Sejanus thinks is his wife, are surrounded by soldiers. If he escapes, they have instructions to kill her. And you.”

“My friend can escape without alerting the guards.”

“I can’t imagine how. But even if he did, he’d never get by the geese.”

Connolly did a double take. “Did you say *geese*?” he said in dismay, wondering if his Latin had just failed him.

“Yes. They were kept away when you arrived, but there are almost fifty here. And nothing can stop them from sounding an alarm.”

Connolly wondered if he was being put on, but Casca’s expression was deadly serious. Apparently, Boyd hadn’t been told about *all* the security arrangements here.

“Look,” began Connolly, “you said, yourself, that Dorso trusts me. I’m asking *you* to trust me. We can and will escape. I just need you to work your . . . grapevine, to send a message to the senator. Make sure

he's told what I just said. Namely, that we plan to escape and join him. So it's critical that we know where he is."

Casca hesitated.

"All I ask is that you send the message," pressed Connolly. "If he chooses not to disclose his whereabouts, so be it. We'll leave the decision in his hands."

The slave nodded. "That's fair," he said. "I can do that. Although it may take a while for the message to run through the network and return."

"I understand. But try to get an answer as soon as you can."

"I will. If the senator decides to do as you ask, I'll bring back another parchment with directions to his location."

"Thank you!" said Connolly emphatically. "But be careful. This mission is more important than you can possibly imagine."

"I won't let you down," said Casca as he left the room and shut the door behind him.

"Did you both get that?" asked Connolly the moment his visitor left, making sure that Kelly and Justin had been listening in from within their private rooms. They quickly acknowledged that they had.

"What's the deal with the geese?" he added. "I thought I had heard wrong."

"If only," said Boyd in frustration. "They'll make escape a lot more difficult. Sejanus was smart not to tell me about them. I should have guessed. The Romans credit geese with saving the city of Rome from being sacked, after all."

"Now you're just messing with me."

"No, it's true," said Boyd. "Tell him, Sage."

"Justin is correct," said the AI. *"Geese were sacred to the Roman goddess Juno, so flocks around her temple were left alone rather than killed for food. In 390 BC, the Gauls laid siege to Rome, attempting a surprise attack by scaling Capitoline Hill, near Juno's temple. The Gauls silenced local dogs by feeding them raw meat, but the geese warned the Romans of the attack, allowing them to prevail."*

Connolly rolled his eyes. "Now I've heard everything."

"They've been used as low-tech security ever since," said Boyd.

“Turns out they put guard dogs to shame. Raise them from chicks and they’ll imprint on anyone they’re exposed to, seeing them as part of their flock. Sejanus no doubt made sure everyone here is immune. But anyone the geese see as an outsider will set them off. They’re super territorial. They can’t be bribed with food, can sense motion at great distance, and have better eyesight and hearing than dogs. Their eyesight isn’t as great at night, but even in the dark, they can still see many times better than humans. And they issue honks piercing enough to wake the dead.”

“Well isn’t that a nifty little secret weapon,” said Connolly.

Boyd nodded. “Yeah, it’s not welcome news.”

“Perfect,” said Connolly. “And here I thought I’d seen the last of this in Nazi Germany.”

“The last of *what*?” asked Boyd.

“Goose-stepping,” said Connolly in amusement.

Kelly couldn’t help but laugh. “Well done,” she said. “I expected you to make a bad joke, but not this one. I guessed you’d say *our goose is cooked*. Or come up with a riff on the adage, *what’s good for the goose is good for the gander*.”

“Me too,” said Boyd. “Jim’s creativity is giving me, you know . . . *goosebumps*.”

Kelly groaned. “Another possibility I missed,” she said. “You two are just full of surprises.”

“I just hope we haven’t used them all up,” replied Boyd, his tone no longer one of amusement. “Because we’re going to need a few more if we want to get out of here alive.”

48

Centurion Linus Vetus and four of his men crept through the cavernous darkness of the thick woods toward their respective targets, a process that was painstakingly slow. It was almost an hour before midnight, and the stars and moon were mostly blocked by clouds, making it impossible to see more than a few inches in front of their faces. Torches or oil lamps were out of the question, as they would advertise the presence of the approaching soldiers more completely than trumpets.

Vetus was vaguely aware of the hooting of owls and the erratic flying of bats winging through the trees and sky overhead. Operating in near total darkness was already unnerving, but the sounds and stirrings of scores of nocturnal creatures roaming the woods made it even more so.

Vetus hated this assignment. A Roman soldier should never have to lurk in the shadows. Never have to slink around like a wraith, hiding from an enemy. It smacked of cowardice.

But these had been his orders, the strangest he had ever been given. Perhaps the strangest *anyone* had ever been given.

Apparently, Marcus Dorso had been spotted in these woods, and earlier that morning, Sejanus had sent the two best trackers in Rome to scout out the situation. They had reported a group of fourteen runaway slaves busily training with weapons and planning an attack on who knew what, laughably pathetic in their efforts.

But the spies had also seen one former senator, and *his* efforts were far from a joke. In fact, they were reported to have been nothing less than supernatural.

The scouts hadn't stayed long, for fear of discovery, but they had seen all they needed to.

Marcus Dorso had parked himself calmly on a low tree branch, carefully setting a small white cube beside him. He had asked one of his followers, more than a little reluctant at first, to throw spears in his direction. The spears had raced toward him, cutting through the air at great speed, but had all inexplicably slammed into the ground before reaching their target, as if they had been batted down by the hand of a phantom giant. It was as if Dorso was sitting in the center of an invisible iron cocoon.

Minutes later a nearby tree had been uprooted and had risen above the treetops, while another was crushed into pulp. These supernatural events were similar to what the slave who had first found Dorso had reported. The small cube had been present then as well, and was surmised to be the source of Dorso's power. Given that both spies confirmed this initial report, Sejanus had no choice but to believe it was true.

And no choice but to order the centurion and his small team to approach in the dead of night, when Dorso was fast asleep.

Everything about this mission was wrong. Vetus had no interest in cowardly attacks, or in entering a dark woods, or in having to inch forward with his arms extended like a blind man. And he especially had no interest in facing the supernatural.

But this was still preferable to having to face an irate Lucius Sejanus, so they needed to get this right.

Dorso and ten runaway slaves were all sleeping soundly on thin piles of leaves on the ground, within a clearing likely produced by the former senator and his extraordinary cube. Four of the slaves, who had volunteered for the first watch, had their swords drawn and oil lamps lit, monitoring approaches on all sides. They formed a rough circle around their sleeping comrades, about ten feet in from the tree line and facing outward.

The fully enclosed brass oil lamps allowed the designated guards to see anyone in their immediate vicinity, but they also created tiny, flickering targets, visible from many hundreds of paces away.

Vetus gently tugged the arm of the man beside him, the most lethal archer in the praetorian guard. The soldier had been feeling his

way forward as carefully and blindly as the centurion, inching his way toward the northernmost watch keeper, but it was time to come to a halt. A few more steps and the light from their target's lantern might reveal their presence.

The centurion pulled the archer behind a wide tree trunk and they crouched there in silence, barely breathing. Vetus waited for almost seven minutes, making sure their comrades, moving in from other directions, had ample time to get into position.

Finally, it was time. Vetus took a deep breath and signaled his partner. The soldier extended his bow, nocked an arrow, and nodded his readiness, a gesture that the centurion could only see because he was inches away. Vetus slowly removed his sword, not making a sound, and nodded back.

The archer stepped out from behind the tree trunk, used the faint light of the lamp nearest him to zero in on the chest of the man who held it, and let his arrow fly. The arrow exploded from his bow with such force and accuracy that the bronze arrowhead pierced the slave's heart and kept driving through his chest until a few centimeters of the tip emerged through the man's back.

The instant the shot was taken, Vetus flew forward, knowing that everything depended on him breaking through the defensive gap now created and reaching Marcus Dorso before he could come to his senses. He prayed to Jupiter that he wouldn't trip over anything in the dim light of the lantern, now on the ground but still lit, and that his men would take out their own targets. If not, he would be cut down by any of the guards left standing, whom he was ignoring in his blind, headlong dash to reach the ex-senator.

He was vaguely aware of the sound of three other slaves falling to the ground, hopefully having been pierced by multiple arrows, but he had no time to check. He reached Dorso just as the man's eyes were flying open, and he bounded the last three feet and cracked the hilt of his sword into the back of Dorso's skull, returning him to sleep.

The centurion quickly dragged his victim's unconscious body back into the trees and out of further danger as the ten sleeping slaves awakened and jumped to their feet, swords in hand.

While the praetorians were outnumbered, they were highly trained, armed, and wearing armor, while their opponents had no armor and little training. To the former slaves' credit, they fought valiantly, but the encounter quickly turned into a massacre. The night calls of woodland creatures were interrupted by human screams of agony, and the dim lanterns soon illuminated nothing but dead husks, disembodied heads, and a number of severed limbs strewn about the clearing, which had splattered the slaves' makeshift beds with their own blood.

The carnage was over in less than a minute, and Vetus breathed a sigh of relief. The key had been knocking Dorso unconscious before he could access the power of the cube. After that, it had been a foregone conclusion.

The centurion ordered his men to gather up the four fallen oil lamps, and to light another one nearby. They would use them until they reached the torches they had left at the edge of the woods.

While this was happening, Vetus stepped behind a wide tree trunk, out of sight, and tested the cube, pressing on it, shaking it, and waving it around to see what would happen. The answer was nothing. After a few more quick attempts, he gave up and rejoined his men. Had he been able to access its power, he would have used it to kill them all and keep the strange object for himself.

Disappointed, he handed the cube to his fastest rider. They had all arrived on horseback, but had tied their mounts a half mile from Dorso's location.

"Get this to the fort and Sejanus as quickly as you can," he ordered.

He and the others would follow much more slowly, taking turns carrying Dorso until they reached their mounts, ensuring the former senator and the cube were kept as far apart from each other as possible.

Vetus allowed himself a smile. The mission, as painful as it had been, couldn't have gone better. Dorso had been put out of commission before he could do any damage, and the cube would soon be in Sejanus's hands.

Just as importantly, the former senator was still alive, as the regent had insisted.

All in all, Lucius Sejanus would be extremely well pleased.

49

The man named Casca walked slowly across the expansive grounds between two of Sejanus's residences, clutching a flaming metal torch to cut through the inky blackness. Several geese looked up as he passed but remained silent, recognizing him as one of the flock.

He approached the row of mighty white pillars marking the entrance to the grand residence that now housed a strange prisoner named Connolly, and secured his torch inside one of several metal sconces attached to the structure.

Two beefy praetorians stood guard on either side of a towering archway door leading inside, and eyed the approaching slave suspiciously. Both stood beside oval shields marked with scorpion insignias, and both were clad in leather body armor and metal helmets.

"What are you doing here?" barked the guard in command. "You shouldn't be out this late."

Casca lowered his eyes. "Apologies, sir," he said, "but the prisoner insisted that I empty his chamber pot and return it to his room. He specified this be done a few hours after midnight."

"That makes no sense," said the guard. "No one would allow their sleep to be disturbed for such a trivial purpose. Go back to your quarters immediately."

"I know it's an odd request," said Casca. "But he's an odd prisoner. He finds sleeping in the same room with his . . . waste, disturbing. And the regent instructed me to make this prisoner as comfortable as possible. To do whatever he asks."

The two praetorians exchanged anxious glances. They were aware that Sejanus had issued this order, and neither could risk finding themselves on the wrong side of the regent. "Go ahead, then," said the only guard who had spoken.

Casca let them open the door for him and he calmly walked across the threshold into the murky residence, faintly illuminated by a number of clay oil lamps spaced at even intervals. The instant the door was shut behind him he picked up his pace and made it to Connolly's room as quickly as he could, picking up a lamp as he neared the door.

He knocked gently at first, and then with greater urgency.

Inside the room, which was as dark as a cave, Jim Connolly bolted awake as the knocks finally registered. "Sage," he whispered, "what time is it?"

"One thirty-four in the morning," replied the AI as the persistent rapping continued. *"By modern reckoning."*

"Who's there?" said Connolly in what he hoped was the direction of the door.

"Casca," came the muffled reply through the heavy wooden barrier. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," said Connolly excitedly, aware that Sage was even now rousing Kelly and Justin as it had been ordered and patching them in. Connolly had insisted that Casca come get him, day or night, if Dorso decided to share his whereabouts. And the time traveler had come up with the chamber pot idea to give him an excuse to visit during off hours.

Casca and his oil lamp entered, bringing a welcome but faint illumination with them. "I'm afraid I have bad news," he said, and the distraught look on his face spoke volumes. "Almost five hours ago one of Centurion Vetus's slaves, loyal to Marcus Dorso, overheard the centurion preparing for a mission. Sejanus had apparently learned where Senator Dorso was hiding. He ordered Vetus to go there and knock the senator unconscious, and kill everyone else who was with him."

"How could this happen?" demanded Connolly. "How did Sejanus find him? How did Sejanus even know he was alive?"

The slave shook his head. "I don't know."

"When is the mission set to start?" said Connolly, trying to fend off growing panic.

“Start?” repeated Casca in horror. “It’s already *over*. And the centurion was successful. The slave may have learned of the mission, but it was too late. Vetus and his men left on horseback, making it impossible to warn the senator in time.”

“Why didn’t you come get me?”

“What could you have done? Even if you escaped, you couldn’t have warned him either. Sejanus also ordered the centurion to retrieve a small white cube, bring it to the center of Castra Praetoria, and have it protected more carefully than the emperor or Sejanus himself. I have no idea why it’s so important to him. I got word from the network that it arrived at the fort almost two hours ago.”

Connolly felt sick to his stomach, but couldn’t help but admire the speed and efficiency of the senator’s personal Pony Express—which didn’t even have any ponies.

“And Dorso? Did they bring him to the praetorian fort also?”

“No. I got word just a few minutes ago that he arrived at the palace. I waited to come get you until I knew his fate. He’s unconscious, but alive, and being held prisoner. Apparently, Sejanus insisted that he be kept separate from the cube.”

“Shit!” said Connolly in English to his two companions, who were listening through their comms. “The bastard somehow figured things out. The worst-case scenario.”

“We need to get out of here yesterday,” replied Boyd in his ear.

The slave eyed the prisoner in confusion. “What language was that?” he asked.

Connolly ignored the question. “Are there any horses up here?” he asked, returning to Latin.

“None. Sejanus keeps the only one, but he left an hour ago. His destination is almost certainly either the palace or the fort, but I haven’t heard which.”

“Any horses at those two locations?” asked Connolly.

“A few dozen at the palace, and even more at the fort.”

“I assume the palace is enormous and protected by swarms of soldiers. Where within the palace is Sejanus’s bedroom?”

“It isn’t,” said Casca. “He stays in a guest house a fair distance off

the north wing. It's still magnificent, but it isn't the palace."

Connolly looked confused. "But Sejanus told my warrior friend that he often stays at the palace when he isn't here."

"The palace *grounds*, but not the palace. Believe me, I'm his most trusted slave—or so he *thinks*—and I've been there many times. He may be regent, and he may wield great power, but Tiberius would never let him take over the palace. He does stay there, but not in the main structure. Which makes him more vulnerable to attack."

"How so?"

"While the palace proper is protected by countless soldiers, there are only eight men protecting the guest house. The palace guard would join the fight if they knew Sejanus was being attacked. But they're a healthy distance away, and your friend might be able to take out all the guards protecting the guest house without alerting them."

"Wouldn't he trigger the geese alarm?" said Connolly, a question he never imagined himself asking.

"No. There aren't any geese there, or at the fort. Far too many men at the fort for the flock to imprint on. And Tiberius hates geese. He finds them too loud, and too prone to leave droppings."

"Anything else we should know?"

"Yes. Sejanus keeps the entrance to his palace guest house well illuminated by torchlight all night long. And only the west side of the house has slopes and trees for concealment. But these exist on purpose. To entice potential attackers to approach from this side, since it's riddled with traps."

"What kind of traps?"

"Ditches concealed under sticks, leaves, and dirt. Ditches with sharpened spikes at the bottom. Anyone who steps on the covering above crashes through and gets impaled."

"Well that sounds . . . horrible," said Connolly, swallowing hard.

He paused in thought. "Where is Dorso likely being held?"

"Inside a torture room Sejanus had specially built into the north corner of the guest house," said Casca. "Because torture amuses him," he added, looking as if he might vomit at the prospect of the senator being harmed. "The room doesn't have bars, but it doesn't need them.

Sejanus has embedded metal rings in concrete blocks buried in the ground. These rings can be attached to multiple thick chains to ensure that prisoners are pinned there. The room has a dirt floor so that blood soaks into the ground and doesn't ruin any of Sejanus's tiles."

"Very . . . *tidy* of him," said Connolly in disgust. "Thanks for the information," he added. "This is very helpful. But I need a few minutes to . . . gather my thoughts. Can you remove my chamber pot and empty it in case the guards check up on you?"

"Of course," said the slave, who soon exited the room, plunging Connolly back into darkness.

"What's the plan, Justin?" he said out loud the moment the door closed.

"First, of course, we escape. Using the plan we discussed. But we need to leave right away, which means Casca will have to come with us. No way he'll be able to explain visiting with you in the middle of the night five minutes before we escape. If we leave him here, they'll be convinced he helped us and torture him. I feel terrible about that, but there's nothing we can do about it."

"I understand," said Connolly. "And so will he. Based on the awed expression that comes over his face whenever he talks about Dorso, I think he'll jump at the chance to join him permanently. And his knowledge should prove valuable."

"So where to after we escape here?" said Kelly.

"The palace," replied Boyd immediately. "Our friend Jesus Christ needs to be our first priority. My guess is that Sejanus is at the fort now attempting to work the cube. We just have to hope to hell he doesn't get lucky and unlock the glyphs. Assuming he doesn't, when he discovers he can't make the cube do anything, he'll eventually give up and travel to his private torture chamber to interrogate Dorso."

"Which will be an epic disaster," said Connolly. "Dorso can't tell him how to operate the cube, anyway, because he doesn't know. Not manually, at least. And there's no way the cube responds to a psychopath like Sejanus telepathically."

"Right," said Boyd. "Sejanus could mutilate Dorso during the interrogation, or kill him. So our strategy is clear. Escape. Free Dorso.

Then free the cube. In that order."

"I understand we don't have a choice," said Kelly, "but won't we be mauling the timeline pretty badly?"

Before either man could respond, she addressed the AI. "Sage, is there any historical record of any of this? Of an escape from here? Of an attack on the palace guest house? Or of a white cube being protected at the praetorian fort?"

"*Not a word,"* replied the AI. *"But this doesn't mean it didn't happen. Only a small percentage of those living in ancient times could read or write. There were no newspapers—or paper, for that matter—and no computers, videos, reporters, libraries, or printing presses. Recorded history of this time period was scant—foggy and unreliable. A huge percentage of important events that happened in this time have been lost to history."*

"That's at least somewhat comforting," said Kelly. "So where, exactly, is this palace in which Dorso is being held?"

"On Palatine Hill," replied the AI. *"Which, interestingly enough, is where the word palace comes from."*

"We have no time for trivia, Sage," said Boyd. "Jim," he added, switching gears, "when Casca returns, have him give you detailed directions for the fastest routes to the palace and then the praetorian fort. He'll be with you as a guide, but you should have this information . . . just in case."

"Won't Sage also know the routes?" replied Connolly. "At least roughly."

"Yes. These are historical destinations, and massive landmark structures, so they shouldn't be hard to spot. But I'll need to haul ass over to the palace. Unfortunately, that will mean I'll be leaving you and Kelly behind, at least temporarily. You'll be out of Sage's range until you can catch up."

Connolly hated the idea of separating, but understood the need.

Much earlier that evening, prior to turning in for the night, he and his fellow time travelers had engaged in almost three more hours of discussion. In the end, they had unanimously agreed that letting Dorso become emperor could only end in disaster.

After that, the decision as to what they needed to do became easy.

There may have been many in their day who were highly critical of Christianity—of all religions—but they needed to ensure that history repeated itself. To ensure humanity survived long enough for people of good will to find the cubes and be in a position to finally unlock their secrets.

But they couldn't persuade Dorso to take up the reins of a ministry if he was dead when they reached him. Which is why Boyd had to get there as fast as he could, no matter what collateral damage might accrue along the way.

There was a quick rap at the door and their slave friend reentered with a lamp and empty chamber pot.

"Casca's back," said Connolly in English. "I'll explain to him why he needs to join us and have him get to Kelly with an extra lamp. I estimate we'll need about ten minutes more before your jailbreak."

"I'll be ready," said Boyd grimly.

50

Casca entered the room holding two oil lamps and walked to where Kelly was bound by a single chain, setting one of the small lamps down beside her.

“Thanks,” her voice said in perfect Latin, transmitted through the tiny speaker attached to her tunic. “And it’s nice to meet you,” she added.

At this point she didn’t care what their ally might think when he noticed her lips weren’t moving. Besides, he must be getting used to impossibilities when it came to the trio of prisoners. Connolly had assured him that Kelly would somehow know who he was and be expecting him, but didn’t say how.

Give me one minute, she thought at Sage, who sent these words through the attached speaker in Latin.

She removed the bottle of embrittlement agent from her tunic, carefully spread a single drop along the link of chain nearest her right wrist, and waited for about thirty seconds as her visitor looked on in fascination in the dim light.

His eyes widened as she yanked her arm and the link snapped, freeing her from the iron grid embedded in the nearby window.

“Did that . . . liquid . . . melt your chain?” asked the slave in dismay.

“Close enough,” replied Kelly. “Check outside the door,” she added. “If the coast is clear, we’ll need to get to Connolly’s room immediately.”

“The coast?” he repeated in confusion. “We’re nowhere near the coast.”

“Right,” replied Kelly. “Sorry. I meant to say this: go out and let me know if you see or hear anyone.”

While the slave stepped outside, Kelly issued telepathic orders to

Sage. *"From now on,"* she instructed, *"don't translate English idioms word for word. Choose Latin words that will impart the same meaning. Same going in the other direction. Do this for Justin and Jim also."*

As the AI confirmed the order, Kelly wondered why they hadn't thought to do this earlier.

Casca reentered the room and reported that no one was stirring. Kelly's room was near the front of the expansive residence, which faced northwest, and they were able to make it to the opposite end of the estate, where Connolly resided, without being seen.

Other than the guards outside, the rest of the soldiers seemed to be asleep, either in the two rooms inside, or the three barracks that surrounded the estate.

Less than a minute later, with the help of one additional drop of embrittlement agent, Connolly was also free.

Casca surveyed the area and then led them from the room, with Connolly taking his wool blanket with him as Boyd had instructed. They tiptoed to the southwest wall of the house, the direction they'd need to travel to get to the palace, and Kelly removed the belt from her tunic, which was mostly C4x attached to a thin strip of leather. She rolled a section of the plastic explosive into a thin, long worm, which she stuck to the wall, forming an arch shape up from the floor large enough for a man to crawl through. She pressed the plastic flat, making it look like she had applied a thin strip of putty in preparation for a home improvement project.

"Time to hide," she said to Casca when this was completed. "Let's find that storage closet you're so keen on. You're sure we'll all be able to fit inside?"

"It will be a very tight squeeze. Breathing will be a challenge. But I'll make sure we fit."

"Great," said Connolly, rolling his eyes. "Good thing I had a light supper."

Justin Boyd maintained radio silence so his fellow time travelers wouldn't be disturbed as they prepared, but it took all of his

willpower to do so. He had already applied liquid embrittlement agent to the metal in his cuffs, rather than the many chains attached, and the night-vision function of his smart contact lenses had long been activated.

He was itching to get started. More than itching—in danger of losing his mind. The chains gave him plenty of play, but not enough to pace, which is what he desperately wanted to do.

"We're in place and ready," reported Kelly through his comm.

"Outstanding," said Boyd in relief. He held his right wrist steady and used his other hand to yank at the cuff as hard as he could, but it resisted several attempts. The iron was thick and he couldn't get great leverage, so even given the application of the embrittlement agent and his enhanced strength and speed, it was an arduous task that took several minutes per cuff. Breaking links in the chains would have been much easier, but he didn't want to be bogged down by heavy bracelets.

"Justin?" said Kelly telepathically as he began to work on freeing his ankles. *"Are you coming?"*

"Sorry, working on it," he thought back at her as the cuff on his left leg snapped off. *"Not too long now."*

The second leg iron snapped off and Boyd rushed to the door, leaving it open behind him as he exited with his wool blanket. He had been imprisoned inside the least secure of the residences, and it was deserted at this late hour, as expected.

He quickly made his way to the back of the house, and minutes later had puttied a C4x archway on the wall similar to what Kelly had done. With this complete, he removed the remaining plastic explosive from his belt and formed it into two balls, one the size of an orange, and a smaller one the size of a marble. He returned the tiny marble of C4x to his left pocket for easy access, keeping the dropper bottle of embrittlement agent and the small blister pack of heart pills in his right.

Finally, Boyd retreated into a separate room, giving the potent explosive the respect it deserved.

"Blasting through the wall now," he broadcast to Sage, who relayed

this to his comrades. He immediately directed his AI to hit the C4x with a signal that would direct its explosive force toward the wall, wasting very little of its energy in the other direction.

Even so, a massive fireball erupted at the back of the house, punching a hole in the thick Roman concrete and rocking the entire structure. The presence of the geese made stealth impossible, but if one had to kick a hornets' nest, a C4x explosion was a way to do it in style.

He rushed to the scorched, smoking hole in the wall, set the blanket down in a bunch to avoid being burned, and crawled over it through the opening. Once outside, he immediately sprinted toward the residence that housed his fellow prisoners, serenaded on his journey by a chorus of dozens of indignant geese throughout the grounds who were honking for all they were worth.

"Too late, watch-geese," he said under his breath. "The alarm's already been sounded."

He continued racing at full speed over terrain so dark he couldn't possibly be seen by any human, his smart contact lenses turning him into the ultimate nocturnal creature. He had such a head of steam that even the normally aggressive geese scattered as he passed, increasing the intensity of their wing beating and honking dramatically.

When he was thirty yards away from the magnificent row of pillars at the front of the residence containing his friends, he hurled the larger ball of C4x toward it. The plastic explosive hit the ground and rolled to a stop exactly where he wanted it. Close enough to draw guards to the front of the structure and distract them from the explosion at the back. But not close enough to kill anyone.

Boyd ran for five more seconds and then changed course toward the back of the estate.

Whether roused by the initial explosion in the distance, or by the geese nearby, legionnaires were pouring from the two barracks he could see, each carrying a torch to light the way, frantically searching for an unknown and seemingly invisible enemy.

"Ready to move?" asked Boyd telepathically.

"More than ready," replied Kelly. *"We're crammed in a closet the size*

of a coffin."

"Sage, now!" he ordered his AI, coming to a complete stop.

The C4x archway that Kelly had prepared and the ball he had just thrown exploded simultaneously with ear-melting fury, shaking the building and creating massive and blinding bursts of light.

Boyd counted seven soldiers at the back of the building, all of them panicking. Night fighting was exceedingly rare in ancient times, and they were reeling from explosions they had no capacity to comprehend. Carrying torches in one hand was awkward and clumsy, and the praetorians surely feared that they had incurred the wrath of Jupiter, who was hitting them with ground-shaking fireballs.

The group of soldiers had lost all cohesion, becoming little more than fish in a barrel. Boyd came at them from the shadows, taking them out one at a time, moving with an agility that would have been too fast to follow in the middle of the day, let alone by torchlight. He struck with chilling purpose, breaking bones to incapacitate some, while beating others into total unconsciousness.

As Boyd cut the men down like a human cyclone, he noted with satisfaction that his three comrades, each holding a small lantern, had made it through the smoking hole Kelly had blasted in the back wall of the estate.

He dodged a sword being held by the last of the legionnaires and then spun the attacker around, breaking his arm and slamming his face into the hard ground.

"All clear on this side," he told his friends. *"Keep going southwest into the darkness. I'll join you in a few minutes."*

"Why a few minutes?" asked Kelly as she and her two male companions began to quickly pick their way between fallen soldiers to do as Boyd had instructed.

"Slight change of plans," he said as he rushed off toward the front of the residence. *"I'll be leading them in the wrong direction. Can't risk them catching up to you while we're separated. You might say that I'm sending them on a, you know . . . wild goose chase."*

Kelly groaned. *"Really, Justin? A goose joke in the middle of a pitched battle. You couldn't resist?"*

Boyd smiled as he ran but didn't reply. Instead, he found a lone soldier who had wandered from the herd and drove the palm of his right hand into the man's nose, relieving him of his torch as he fell, hoping that he hadn't killed the man.

He picked up speed, charging past the front of the residence while giving it a wide berth. Once the columns began to recede behind him, he lifted the torch high to attract attention, as if he were running through a stadium to light the Olympic flame. Over a dozen soldiers were still flailing about near the estate, uncertain of whom to fight or which direction to run.

An uncertainty he was about to clear up.

He came to an abrupt halt, turned to face the towering front pillars of the estate, and waved the torch over his head as if he were landing a plane. "Hey cowards!" he bellowed in Latin, which Sage amplified through his speaker to thunderous levels. "Come and get me! If you aren't too afraid!"

Boyd waited until he was sure he had gotten their attention and then continued moving at a slow jog, making sure the approaching soldiers were able to follow him.

A long, thick hedge appeared in front of him, and he decided to barrel through it rather than taking the long way around.

It was an epic miscalculation.

The tightly manicured bushes were riddled with short, rugged thorns that he had failed to notice, and they shredded his tunic and skin in dozens of places, producing shallow but painful punctures and cuts and staining the remnants of his clothing with bright-red respirocytes.

He forced himself to ignore the pain and picked up speed, cursing his own stupidity as the throng chasing him made sure to go around the hedge.

After five minutes of leading them in a direction opposite to the one his three allies were taking, he snuffed the torch out on the ground, making him invisible in the darkness. He immediately began to circle back to his friends, taking a long route to be sure he wasn't seen or heard.

"Kelly, I've led them away," he told her telepathically when he got back within Sage's quarter-mile transmission range. *"I'll be joining you in a few minutes."*

"Slight complication. Two of the soldiers weren't fooled and ended up coming after us."

She tried to keep her thoughts calm, but Boyd knew they were anything but.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a panic.

"We are, yes. But Casca didn't make it. He saw them coming first and stopped them for a few seconds. Which saved our lives."

"How did you avoid them?"

"We didn't. It turns out that young Otto got plenty of training in martial arts after we left. He isn't you, but he's awfully impressive. They didn't even know what was hitting them. Literally. As you've learned yourself, they haven't seen many Jackie Chan or Jason Statham movies."

"Your grandfather really took out two armed soldiers?"

"Yes. Because Casca held them up for long enough for him to get involved. Casca's death is all our fault. He wouldn't have even been in this situation if not for us."

Boyd frowned. *"You can't beat yourself up, Kelly. We didn't intend for this to happen, and he was thrilled to come with us. We can mourn his loss and celebrate his bravery later. But there's a lot going on. So right now we have to put this out of our minds."*

There was a long pause. *"I'll try,"* she responded finally. *"But we also have another problem. Jim's pulse is racing. He's lying down and I just gave him another heart pill. This and rest should calm his cardiovascular system back down and restore rhythm, but we won't be moving for a while."*

Boyd cursed to himself. A problem they didn't need. It was just lucky that Jim Connolly had been able to handle himself so well. He didn't want to even think what could have happened otherwise.

"We'll meet you near the palace as planned," added Kelly, *"but we'll be lagging behind more than we thought. I'm guessing by one to two hours. We'll need to take our time, even after Jim bounces back."*

"That's not acceptable!" insisted Boyd. *"It's too long for you to be out*

of communications range. And too long for you to be exposed."

"It can't be helped."

"Yes it can. I'm staying with you until we can all get to the palace together."

"No you're not!" insisted Kelly emphatically, the strength of her telepathic objection blasting his brain as if she had shouted into his ear. *"Are you kidding me? You need to get your ass to the palace at best possible speed. Are you going to babysit us? Or make sure Jesus Christ isn't tortured or killed? We're talking about Jesus fricking Christ. It's the easiest decision ever."*

"Goddammit!" he replied, knowing she was right. *"Stay out of sight and make sure to block the light from your lamps. And relieve the soldiers of their daggers, so you and Jim can each have one."*

"Will do, Justin. And don't worry about us, we can handle ourselves. It's the dead of night, and no other soldiers will be coming this way. We'll get Jim settled down and join you before you know it."

"I'm so sorry you're in this position," broadcast Boyd. *"If only there were two of me."*

"There are two of you, Justin. Only the other one is in stasis a few thousand years in the future. But remember, even if I die here—which I won't—there's a backup copy of me that you can revive. Assuming you get Dorso and history back on course."

"But we don't have a backup version of your grandfather."

"I know," replied Kelly solemnly. *"But there's nothing we can do about that."*

"I love you, Kelly. Be careful."

"I love you, too, Justin. And we'll be okay. Really. So forget about us and go storm the guest house."

Boyd sighed. *"Roger that,"* he replied.

51

The American major approached the palace guest quarters that housed Lucius Sejanus with great caution, still bleeding from over a dozen cuts and stab wounds, although these had slowed to a crawl. His respirocytes ensured that he wasn't out of breath, even after a thirty-minute sprint, and the night-vision feature of his smart lenses allowed him to cover ground in total darkness.

Tiberius may have outlawed geese on the premises, but Sejanus had made sure he had a dozen flaming torches planted beyond the only entrance, with no trees or structures to hide behind, making a stealth approach from the front all but impossible.

Two guards manned the door. If Casca was to be believed, that would leave six more inside, probably asleep. Boyd was down to a marble-sized ball of C4x, but at least this was usable. The palace guards were about a quarter of a mile away, and only a ball this small could be deployed without every last one of them being alerted.

The lack of technology in this age could be maddening, but it could also be a blessing. If cell phones or other modern communications technology existed, the entire Roman army would now know that he'd escaped, and every guard at the palace would be expecting him.

As Boyd continued to recon the area, he used his comm to amplify his hearing and made out the faint clip-clop of hooves far off in the distance. He swiveled around and spotted a tiny horse maybe eighty yards away, moving at a slow trot, visible only because its rider was gripping a flaming torch. And it was coming toward the guest house.

The rider was Lucius Sejanus! It had to be.

Which could only mean that the regent had failed to activate the cube, as they had hoped, and was coming to interrogate Dorso. Boyd's timing couldn't have been better.

Few people deserved death more than this tyrant, but Boyd

reminded himself to be careful. Sejanus was too important, historically, to die here.

Instead, tragically, Boyd would need to use lethal force on the eight legionnaires guarding the guest house. The stakes were too high to do anything else. He couldn't risk that one of them might revive and alert the palace guards while he was working to free Marcus Dorso.

Boyd had been lucky so far. He had made it here just before Sejanus could get his clutches on his famous prisoner. And if Boyd played his cards right, he could make sure that this psychopath never did.

Still, he would have to act quickly. He calculated that he had less than a minute to come up with a plan.

Nonus Sura, the praetorian guard in charge of the night shift at the palace guest house, tilted his head and listened carefully. He could hear the faint sound of hoof beats in the distance, growing louder. "It looks like the regent has returned," he whispered to his companion with a sigh. "Let's hope he's in a good mood."

"When he learns his prisoner is awake, I'm sure he will be."

Sura shook his head. His companion was new to this duty, and had no idea how things worked. It was sheer folly to attempt to predict Sejanus's mood, which was always volatile, and often made no sense at all. On occasion the regent could be friendly and generous. But these occasions were rare. Instead, Sejanus seemed to be growing crueler and more demanding with the passing of every day.

Sura finally spotted the regent in the distance and watched him ride to within a hundred paces of the guest house and then dismount in front of his small stable. He would leave his horse inside, as always, and close the remaining distance on foot.

Sura jumped as a crashing sound emanated from the west side of the house, followed immediately by a bloodcurdling scream of utter agony piercing the night. The guard's heart raced and adrenaline poured into his system.

Someone had fallen into a spike trap. And he might not be alone.

"Wake the men!" he ordered his partner. "Get them out here now! We're under attack! Hurry!"

The newcomer rushed through the entrance, screaming a wake-up call to everyone inside.

Sura strained to hear additional telltale signs of an approaching enemy, but other than the fading moans of the dying man who had been impaled on the sharpened sticks, it was eerily silent.

Finally, he heard movement just beyond the ring of torches. He braced himself for an attack, but the movement had been caused by Lucius Sejanus himself, who rushed into the lighted space surrounding the front guard station with his sword drawn.

"I heard a scream," he said to Sura. "Report!"

"The men inside are being awakened, sir, and will join us momentarily. Based on the direction of the scream, an intruder fell through a spike trap on the west side. We don't know the intruder's identity or if he's alone, but I was about to investigate."

As Sura finished his brief report, his partner and six reinforcements exited the house and joined them, their already anxious looks intensifying at the sight of Lucius Sejanus.

"Proceed," Sejanus whispered to the head guard, and then motioned for the rest of the soldiers to follow.

Sura and his comrades made it to the west side of the house, with Sejanus taking up the rear, and their torches revealed a now wide-open ditch that an intruder had wandered into, bereft of any sticks or other concealment. No one else was in sight, but there were a number of places to hide on this side, which had been left inviting to draw intruders to their deaths.

Sura reached the edge of the trap and looked down to see just whom it had ensnared.

But the pit was empty.

Fallen sticks and a large rock were lying at the bottom among the sharpened spikes, but no one had been impaled.

How could it be? He was sure the screams had come from this exact spot.

Sura turned to his fellow legionnaires and the regent behind him and shook his head. “It’s empty,” he whispered into the quiet night.

As he finished these words he heard movement from his right. He spun around just in time to see a man barreling toward him like a charging rhino. He began to bring his sword out in front of him to meet the threat but he was too late.

In that instant, Nonus Sura realized the horrible truth.

The spike trap would be claiming a victim on this dark night, after all.

Boyd hugged the ground beneath a gentle slope fifteen feet away from the trap he had sprung, ensuring that he was completely invisible to soldiers walking along the side of the residence. As he looked up over the sloping contour of the ground, he was just able to see the head of the man who was investigating the trap, and counted the heads of the men who had joined him.

Nine in total. Eight guards and Lucius Sejanus, whose headgear was singularly impressive and stood out from the rest.

Perfect.

The numerous torches had made it impossible for Boyd to eliminate the two guards out front without alerting the rest inside, but he had found a way to bring them out to him. To meet them in the open, on his turf, where they would need to carry their own light sources, and he wouldn’t.

He sprang off his stomach to a crouch, and then exploded forward at full speed, bounding to the top of the slope and accelerating toward the first soldier, shoving him into the open ditch while avoiding two other traps that were still concealed. The guard shrieked as his falling body impaled itself on the sharpened spikes, but the sound barely registered as Boyd spun around to face the others.

The first soldier in the line came at him with a sword, but he grabbed the man’s arm and redirected the sword at the soldier’s own neck in one smooth motion. It connected with a sickening finality and blood sprayed from the wound, blinding the man behind him, whom

Connolly dispatched in another blink of an eye, relieving him of a dagger he held.

Sejanus finally managed to get a glimpse of the attacker, and his complexion paled as if he had seen a ghost. “Surrender or Dorso dies!” he shouted, backing away.

Boyd ignored him, continuing to hack through soldiers in a whirlwind, knowing that Sejanus needed Dorso to unlock the secret of the cube and would only kill him as a last resort.

As it quickly became clear to Sejanus that his bluff was being called, he realized he had no other choice but to double down. “Stop him!” he ordered his few remaining men, but didn’t stick around to watch them try, knowing they had no chance. Instead, he rushed to the front of the estate as if he were on fire.

“Come after me and Dorso dies!” he screamed behind him as he darted through the open door. “I swear it.”

Boyd finished slashing through the last of the praetorians, suffering only two shallow gashes to add to those produced by the thorns, and raced inside, not bothering to carry any weapons.

He made his way to the north corner of the estate, to Sejanus’s personal torture room, just in time to see the regent deposit his torch in a metal sconce at the back of the room and slide into position behind a chained Marcus Dorso, holding the tip of his dagger against his throat.

Boyd got to within five feet of the regent before stopping cold. His breath caught in his throat as he took in the scene by the flickering light of a torch.

Dorso was sitting on the ground with irons around his wrists and ankles. Thick chains led from the bracelets to iron rings spaced out around him. The rings had been embedded in concrete, and only the top quarter of each protruded through the dirt. If Dorso had been lying on his back, a captor could use the chains to pull all four of his limbs into a spread-eagle position.

The prisoner had a welt on the back of his head, but his eyes were alert, and he seemed to be taking in the situation at great speed, and relatively calmly, especially under the circumstances.

“Back off!” shouted Sejanus.

Boyd glared at him with a fierce intensity as his mind raced through various options, none of them good.

The regent lifted the tip of his dagger just slightly and pierced the underside of Dorso’s chin. Blood immediately appeared and began to roll down the blade and drip onto the dirt floor. “Take another step and I’ll open his throat like a fountain!” he barked.

And as fast as Boyd was, he knew that he couldn’t disarm the Roman tyrant before he carried out this threat.

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Justin Boyd tried to stay calm, but failed miserably.

He'd been in any number of situations at least this tense before, but this one had him rattled. And for good reason. The blood trickling down Sejanus's blade belonged to a man—or possibly a god—seen as a savior by billions of people.

He gritted his teeth. If he continued to think of the man being held at bloody knifepoint as Jesus Christ, he'd become paralyzed. He had to will himself to believe that the prisoner was a Roman senator named Marcus Dorso, and nothing more. Still worthy of being saved, but not the namesake of the largest religion on Earth.

Boyd could tell the tip of Sejanus's dagger was barely breaking Dorso's skin. He hadn't drawn blood to create permanent damage, but to underscore the seriousness of Dorso's predicament.

"You've made your point, Sejanus!" said Boyd's voice in Latin, emanating from the speaker still miraculously attached to his now-tattered tunic. Sage translated and broadcast each telepathically delivered word so quickly that there was almost no delay between when Boyd finished a sentence and when it was heard in its entirety by the regent. "Remove the tip of your knife from his chin! Now! If you do, I'll back up a few steps."

"Back up first."

Boyd retreated a few feet and Sejanus honored the bargain, lowering the blade so it was still resting against Dorso's neck but was no longer piercing his flesh.

"Why is your accent now perfect?" asked the Roman suspiciously. "And how are you speaking without moving your lips?"

"Lots of practice," replied Boyd. "Do you want a lesson, or can we get on with this?" he added in contempt. "If you leave him uninjured, I'll discuss a deal. If not, you'll be dead quicker than you can imagine. Believe it!"

“I do,” said Sejanus grimly. “I’ve seen how fast you are. But you still aren’t fast enough to reach me before I slice open his neck. And I will, even knowing that you’ll kill me afterward. If I have to die, I’m taking him with me. Believe *that*!”

“No one has to die,” said Marcus Dorso. “We can—”

“Quiet!” demanded Sejanus. “Not another word unless you’re spoken to.”

Boyd caught Dorso’s eye and gave him a reassuring nod. He then turned his gaze back to the regent. “Why didn’t you fetch the palace guards?”

“I knew you’d be right behind me. I’d never make it. My only chance was to threaten Dorso. You recklessly risked your life to free this man days ago. For some reason I can’t fathom, you care deeply about his fate.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Sejanus. I don’t care about him at all. But I couldn’t let you kill him earlier. If you did, the secrets of the white cube would have died with him.”

Sejanus’s eyes bulged. “What do you know of the cube?” he demanded.

“I know it’s very powerful. And that you’d like to use it to overthrow Tiberius. If you let Dorso go, I can help you with that. We can get the cube’s secrets out of him together. You become emperor, and I become your second-in-command.”

Sejanus considered. “No deal,” he said finally. “You’re too dangerous. And you’re lying. This man is hugely important to you. I can see it in your eyes. So leave now or he dies. And grab a torch on your way out. I need to watch you and the torch recede into the distance, far enough away for me to alert the palace guards. Do this, and you have my word I won’t kill him.”

Boyd grimaced and turned his head in thought.

Suddenly, his eyes widened and he inhaled loudly, as if he had seen something alarming in the corner of the room. Sejanus shifted his gaze for just a moment to look, and when he did, Boyd tossed the marble-sized ball of C4x so that it landed softly on the dirt a few feet behind his adversary.

“What did you see?” said Sejanus.

“Nothing. It was just my imagination.”

“No more stalling! You have ten seconds to leave. Ten seconds to begin putting hundreds of paces between us. *Decem*,” he began counting, and Boyd for once didn’t need Sage’s translation. “*Novem*. *Octo*. *Septem—”*

“Okay!” screamed Boyd’s voice from the speaker still attached to his shredded tunic. “You win!”

He backed away six more feet to put Sejanus at ease. “I’ll leave now. I will. But I first need to say a prayer in my own language, asking the gods to hold you to your word.”

Sejanus eyed him suspiciously. “It had better be brief,” he said.

Boyd instructed his AI to broadcast his telepathic words in a singsong, prayerful voice—but no longer in Latin. He bowed his head to the ground so Sejanus wouldn’t suspect he was communicating with Dorso and began.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he began, his words now spilling from the speaker in Hebrew, and in the form of a chant. “When I finish this fake prayer, have a coughing fit. I’m far enough away that he’ll move the knife from your throat, knowing he can still kill you before I reach him. The moment he does, dive to the ground and crawl forward as far as you can. I’ll take care of him. Trust me.”

Boyd stopped chanting, looked up from the ground, and nodded to Sejanus. “Thank you,” he said, returning to Latin.

Dorso suddenly began coughing uncontrollably. Spittle spewed onto Sejanus’s knife arm, and he quickly withdrew it from around Dorso’s neck, disgusted, but also worried his prisoner might inadvertently cut his own throat as the hacking fit continued.

As soon as the knife was pulled away from his neck, Dorso dived to the dirt floor and scrambled as far forward as the chains would allow.

The instant the prisoner hit the ground, Boyd triggered the tiny ball of C4x behind Sejanus, causing him to nearly jump out of his skin as the shock and fury of it took him completely by surprise. Despite the limited amount of C4x used, in close quarters the explosion

seemed massive, striking absolute terror into the heart of Lucius Sejanus and unleashing a thunderous explosion and searing fireball that scorched his back wherever it wasn't protected by armor.

Boyd was already moving as the C4x erupted, and after several lightning steps he launched himself over Dorso's supine body and drove through the regent like a human missile, slamming the back of his helmeted head into the ground with the force of a pile-driver.

The dagger fell from the regent's suddenly limp fingers, and his eyes glossed over as if he were dead.

Boyd rolled off the Roman tyrant with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Yes, he had saved Marcus Dorso. But if he had been overzealous and had killed Lucius Sejanus, the future might be irretrievably altered, regardless of what course Dorso decided to take.

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Boyd quickly checked the regent for a pulse. He found one, but it was exceedingly weak, and there was no guarantee the Roman would recover.

"Are you okay, Senator Dorso?" he had Sage say in Latin to the man coming to a sitting position behind him.

"I'm fine. Thanks to you. But you look to be in bad shape. Are *you* going to be okay?"

"Now that you're free of Sejanus, I couldn't be better. I've gathered a lot of small cuts, but they look a lot worse than they are."

Dorso looked sincerely relieved. "How can I ever repay you?" he said. "It's as if you're my guardian angel."

Boyd coughed, taken aback by the absurdity of these words coming from *this* man. "I'm glad to be of service, sir," he managed to reply. "How is your chin?"

"The bleeding has almost stopped," said Dorso. "And call me Marcus," he insisted. "Please. How many times do you have to save my life before I can get you to use my first name?" he added with a grin. "Not that I'm deserving of any honorifics anyway."

Boyd didn't know how to respond to this. Connolly was right. This man checked the humility and charisma boxes in a big way.

"What is your name?" asked Dorso.

"I'm Boyd."

"Are your friends from the future okay?"

"They are. The woman is named Kelly, and she's my wife. She and Connolly are on their way here, in fact. Should arrive in an hour or two."

"That's great news," said Dorso. "Connolly is a very good man, and I have no doubt your wife fits this same bill."

"Thank you . . . Marcus," said Boyd awkwardly. "Just give me a minute and I'll have you out of those chains. And then my friends and

I will see to it that the cube gets back in your hands."

"Thank you. Both would be much appreciated."

As Boyd looked on, Dorso's expression darkened. "They killed all of my allies when I was captured, didn't they?" he asked, his face reflecting nothing but disgust and a deep sorrow.

"I'm afraid so. I am so sorry."

Several tears appeared in Dorso's eyes. "I am, too," he said. "And it's my fault. I'm like a plague to anyone I get close to. After Sejanus unraveled my plot, you'd think I would have learned a lesson about the dangers of overconfidence. But I didn't. The cube made me feel invincible. I let its power go to my head and I grew careless. A mistake I've made for the last time. If I can get it back, I vow to never cause the deaths of those I love again."

"You didn't cause their deaths, sir. You didn't strike the blows that killed them."

"But the men I lost believed in me, and I let them down."

"They were slaves, and you gave them hope for a better life. Believe me, I didn't know them, but I'm betting they practically, ah . . . *worshiped* you."

"They were all good men. Men who believed in what I was trying to accomplish."

"Then they didn't die in vain."

Boyd reached into his right pocket for the bottle of liquid embrittlement agent and audibly gasped as he realized he no longer *had* a right pocket. The thorns had shredded it open, and the blister pack of pills and the dropper bottle were long gone, probably embedded in a hedge on Esquiline Hill.

"Is there a problem?" said Dorso.

"Maybe," replied Boyd. He began to frisk the unconscious Roman. "I assume Sejanus has the keys to your shackles."

Dorso shook his head. "No. Another man came in just after I awoke. He opened the cuffs, inspected them, and added a few chains. He had the keys, and I heard him ride away on a horse after he left me."

Boyd threw his head all the way back until he was facing the

ceiling. “Really?” he said in frustration. “Are you kidding me?”

“Ah, who are you talking to?” asked Dorso.

Boyd wasn’t sure how to respond. The sky? The Creator? Your father? “Just talking to myself,” he said finally.

Boyd worked to break the chains that held the prisoner, but his efforts were futile, despite his enhanced strength. He couldn’t break a single link, nor dislodge the rings from the concrete. Nor did using the edge of the sword to rain mighty blows down on the chain have any impact.

Finally he gave up, and sat on the dirt floor facing the prisoner.

“So what now?” said Dorso.

“We wait for my wife and Connolly to arrive. Kelly has a liquid that can free you. Assuming she wasn’t stupid enough to go to battle with a hedge of thorns,” he added miserably. “But it looks like we’re stuck here for an hour or two longer.”

“Your wife really has a liquid that can free me from *chains*?” said Dorso.

“I know it sounds impossible, but it isn’t. Trust me.”

“Oh, I do,” said Dorso, shooting him a smile that seemed to outshine the torch. “Only days ago, I would have found this preposterous. Interesting how quickly a perspective can change.”

He paused. “So how far in the future are you and your friends from?”

“Two thousand years.”

“That’s a lot of years. Can all of your people speak without moving their lips?”

“That isn’t what I’m doing, actually. We’ve figured out how to send voices through tiny objects. Humanity has learned how to do many things that seem magical.”

“Including producing a ball of fire on command?”

“In the right circumstances, yes.”

“Your strategy was impressive,” said Dorso. “When you began speaking to me in Hebrew I was stunned.”

“Me too,” said Boyd. “Actually, I don’t really know any Hebrew. Just as the cube can speak directly into one’s mind, I have a device

that allows me to speak any language. Which reminds me, would you prefer we converse in Hebrew?"

"Whichever you'd prefer," said Dorso amicably. "Actually, Aramaic was used in my hometown more than Hebrew."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"Eight. I've always had a knack for them. I'm lucky in that I can pick them up without much effort."

"Do you speak them all like a native?"

"So I've been told," replied Dorso modestly.

The American nodded. Connolly had guessed that this man was exceptionally brilliant, and evidence of a facility with languages that matched Connolly's own certainly supported this conjecture.

Boyd decided to continue using Latin and to continue calling the man in front of him Marcus. Using Hebrew and calling him Yeshua was just too surreal for someone raised Catholic to wrap his mind around, despite his current state of agnosticism. His mother, who still attended church, would have fainted at the prospect of meeting the *Pope*. So how would she have handled *this?*

Perhaps it was lucky that Boyd *wasn't* religious, or his brain might have exploded by now.

Even more daunting, Marcus Dorso was brilliant and charming, and seemed like a really nice guy, earnest and down to earth. Exactly how one might expect Jesus to be, historical or otherwise.

Boyd blew out a long breath. "Forgive me, Marcus," he said, "but I have to ask. Before you left for Rome, was your original name *Yeshua*?"

"It was."

Not that Boyd had any doubt, but a charge of electricity surged through him from this response, nonetheless. "And your mother's name?"

"Myriam."

"Is that the Hebrew equivalent of Mary?" Boyd asked his AI telepathically.

"It is," replied Sage.

Boyd returned his attention to Dorso. "Were you ever told that

there was a strange light in the sky around the time you were born? Maybe a comet, or some other bright celestial object."

"I wasn't. But I wouldn't be shocked if it were true. It's my understanding that the night skies have been more active in the present era than they have been for some time."

Boyd sighed. He wasn't surprised that he wouldn't find a smoking gun. If there was a Creator, perhaps he preferred ambiguity to certainty when it came to the question of divinity. If he produced incontrovertible evidence of his presence, then faith would no longer be required.

While Boyd still didn't believe the man in front of him was divine, nothing he had heard had disproven it, either. "One last question," he said. "If you could indulge me. Did three wise travelers from the east visit your mother and give her gifts to celebrate . . . your birth?"

Dorso laughed. "That's the craziest question I've ever heard. Hard to imagine. But if they did, my mother wouldn't have told me about it, just on the off chance it might inflate my ego. She insisted I remain humble at all times. When I was a boy, I was able to learn things more easily than the other children, and my mother felt that people were naturally drawn to me. So she was always stressing the need for humility. She insisted that I never take myself too seriously. Never become self-important."

"Sounds like a good mom," said Boyd.

"Very much so," said Dorso. "But if I may, it's clear that you have knowledge of my birth that even I don't have. Since you come from two thousand years in the future, this strongly suggests that I'm to become a historic figure."

He paused. "Earlier, Connolly told me that history had no record of me, and that I never became emperor. The only way both can be true is if the presence of the cube changed the future that Connolly knew. In this new future—from which you've come—I must have been able to regain control of the cube, carry out my plans, and dramatically change the world."

"An astute analysis," said Boyd in admiration. "But there is one possibility you didn't consider. That you do become a historic figure—

but only under your original name. Connolly told you that the future has never heard of Marcus Dorso. And that remains true. But it *has* heard of Yeshua."

"Now *that's* hard to imagine," said Dorso.

"I don't doubt it," said Boyd with just the hint of a smile. "But one more thing I forgot to ask. What does the word *messiah* mean to you?"

Dorso looked taken aback by the question. "It refers to the prophesized ruler of Judea," he replied. "The king of the Jews."

"Have you ever thought of yourself in that way?"

"Not ever, at least until the past few days. But to be honest, I've begun to. With the cube on my side, I now believe I can become king of the Roman empire itself, which presently includes Judea. I believe it even now, despite not being in possession of the cube."

Dorso tilted his head in thought. "Connolly asked me if I thought the cube was sent by one of the Roman gods," he continued. "I told him no, because I'm Jewish, and believe in only one god. I didn't elaborate at the time, not wanting to reveal my true identity. But now I'm beginning to think the cube may have been sent to me by this one god. Not to sound self-important—sorry Mom," he added with a grin —"but Connolly went on and on about how meaningful it was that the cube came to me. So I've begun to think that maybe I am slated to fulfill the Messianic prophecy."

Boyd nodded thoughtfully.

"But your messiah question is extremely loaded, Boyd," continued Dorso. "So do you plan to tell me the answer? *Do I* become the ruler of the Roman Empire under my original name? *Do I* achieve my dream of bringing in a new era of peace and compassion and equal rights?"

Boyd blew out a long breath. "It's a long story," he said. "And it's a bit . . . complicated."

Dorso made a show of rattling his chains. "I don't seem to be going anywhere," he said with a wry smile.

Boyd laughed. "This is true," he said. "Okay, then, Marcus," he added. "You asked for it, you got it. Let's talk about your possible futures."

The American major stared into Dorso's eyes and gathered

himself. “I’m sure you’ll find this quite . . . interesting.”

PART 8

“No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says. He is always convinced that it says what he means.”

—George Bernard Shaw

54

Boyd paused to gather his thoughts, and couldn't help but grin at the absurdity of his situation. It was after two in the morning. He was sitting in a homemade torture chamber near the palace in ancient Rome, illuminated by torchlight. And he was about to school a chained Jesus Christ on the history of Christianity.

Just another boring, ordinary night.

"In the future we come from," he began, "you do what the cube has asked of you. You travel back to Judea, change your name back to Yeshua, and preach love, forgiveness, compassion, and so on. In the desert, yes, but mostly in the Galilee region, which is much more hospitable."

"And this preaching actually works?" said Dorso in disbelief.

"Depends on what you mean by *working*."

"To work," replied Dorso, "my words would have to change society during my lifetime. Dramatically. Lead to the quick abolishment of slavery. Lead to women and children being treated the way they deserve. To the end of war, and conquest, and barbarities like the gladiator games, and so many others."

He shook his head. "It just seems impossible to imagine that mere words could have such a quick and profound impact. Or *any* impact, actually, given the might of the empire. Especially words coming from a peasant named Yeshua in Galilee."

Boyd winced. "Yeah, this is where it gets complicated. By the standard you just provided, your efforts don't work. Not in your lifetime."

Dorso remained silent for several seconds digesting this news. "Okay," he said finally, "then let's examine the things I want to accomplish one at a time. See what impact my possible ministry has on each. First, slavery. I know it's been practiced since the beginning of history. My own people, the Jews, were slaves in Egypt for a very

long time. But it's an abomination.

"I doubt you're familiar with the practice," continued Dorso, "but slaves are owned by others. They have no rights, and no freedom. Their owners can use them for sexual gratification, or any other purpose they please. They can torture them and even kill them on a whim."

He stared deeply into Boyd's eyes. "So tell me, if my ministry isn't able to abolish this blight on humanity in my lifetime, when *does* it finally end?"

Boyd sighed. "Never," he said miserably. "Not entirely."

He had been sorely tempted to lie, but while he hadn't always paid attention in Sunday School, he was pretty sure that lying to Jesus Christ wasn't a good idea.

"Even two thousand years from now?" said Dorso in horror.

Boyd nodded. "It's against the law across the world," he said, "and it's less prevalent than ever. But it hasn't disappeared entirely—just moved into the shadows. In Rome of this day, one out of every three people are slaves. Which drops to about one out of ten people if you take the entire world into account. In my time, it's dropped to one out of two to three hundred people. Many of these are women enslaved to provide sex."

Dorso shook his head in disgust. "What about the other issues I raised? Did my ministry have *any* impact on addressing them in my lifetime?"

"Not really, no," admitted Boyd.

"So if I do as the cube asks," said Dorso, "and preach rather than rule, nothing changes. Which is exactly what I predicted. So why would I ever agree to it?" His eyes narrowed in thought. "And if I *did* agree," he added, "how is it possible that I'm still known to history?"

"Because your words eventually have an enormous impact. Like tiny ripples in a pond that keep spreading and growing. You reach disciples, who spread your message after your death. Your ministry is like a wildfire that is born on a single leaf and goes on to consume an entire forest. In fact, you go on to spawn an entire religion, called Christianity, with you as the central figure."

Dorso stared at him, dumbfounded, but remained silent.

"In about three hundred years, Christianity will become the official religion of the Roman Empire. It will be called the Roman Catholic Church, and will still be headquartered within the city of Rome, even two thousand years from now. And other offshoots of Christianity emerge along the way. In my day, Christianity is the largest religion on Earth."

"You mean the one with the most followers?"

"Exactly. Right now, Rome has the highest population of any city on Earth. Do you know how many people live here?"

"I'm not sure. But I'd say about a million."

"In my day, over *two thousand times* this many people are adherents of the religion you inspired. Almost thirty percent of the world's population."

A panoply of emotions crossed Dorso's features. "That is very . . . humbling," he said. "And while I don't doubt you, I can't help but find it almost impossible to believe. I could see my words inspiring some, who pass the torch to others. I could see my ideas becoming more popular with time. But why would I still be the central figure in the movement? You said yourself that I didn't change *anything*."

Boyd winced. "There's a little more to it than that," he said. "Here's the thing," he continued, not sure of the best way to put it. "The church actually believes that you're . . . *divine*. The son of the one God."

"That makes no sense," said Dorso. "I'm *not*. I'm just a man."

"Spoken like a true god," said Boyd with a wry smile.

"What?"

"Just a poor attempt at humor," said Boyd. "But with all due respect, you can't be sure *what* you are. Almost nothing is known about most of your life. There are a few stories from your childhood, but all accounts of you were written after your death, and often contain different information. The story I asked you about, for example, about three visitors bringing gifts, only appears in a single account—out of many. And you don't really emerge onto the world stage until you assume your cousin's ministry. No one knows that you

ever even visited Rome, let alone became a senator."

"What does that have to do with me being divine or not?"

"One account from the future says that you knew you were a god. But just because you aren't aware of your divinity—*at this moment*—doesn't mean you aren't destined to become aware of it soon. It's still possible you're the son of the Creator, but he hasn't yet informed you of your ah . . . heritage. Or your future at his side. Maybe he's purposely keeping this from you right now. Maybe you won't be made aware of who you really are until you begin preaching. Or not until after your death, ensuring that your sacrifices are truly sacrifices."

Boyd paused to let this sink in. "And, yes, it's also entirely possible that you are just a man. As fragile and fleeting as the rest of us. And that when you die, you cease to exist forever."

"When you put it that way," said Dorso with the hint of a smile, "I guess I know which of these possibilities *I'm* hoping for."

Boyd laughed. "Well, none of us knows what happens in the afterlife," he said, "so we all might be pleasantly surprised. But your divinity doesn't really matter to the future," he added. "I mean, it matters to *you*, of course. But either way, you're accepted as the son of the one God."

Dorso shook his head. "I'm still convinced this isn't the case."

"I am too," said Boyd. "But that doesn't make me any less in awe of you as a historical figure. I'm still finding it hard not to call you *sir*—at the very least. Because even assuming we're both right, and you aren't divine, your impact on the world will be profound. And not just the Christian world. As one example, the entire world, regardless of religion, will end up counting years from the date of your birth."

"And you're *sure* you aren't making this up?" said Dorso.

"If I was making it up," said Boyd, swallowing hard, "I'd be sure to avoid this next part."

Dorso's eyes narrowed. "I'm listening."

Boyd wished that his wife and Jim Connolly were here. The three travelers from the future had consulted with Sage and debated for many hours before finally deciding that they did, indeed, need to try to convince Dorso to repeat history. That it *was* the best path forward,

after all, despite some of the negative consequences of Christianity throughout history. But as he embarked on the most difficult part of his discussion with Marcus Dorso, he wished he had the help of his smarter half. And her even smarter grandfather.

Boyd took a deep breath and forged ahead. He told Dorso that if he returned to Judea he would be killed by the Romans—only three years after his ministry began. And he described his companion's death in gory detail.

Boyd then spoke of the huge significance Dorso's death would have on what was to come. How his followers believed he had died for their sins, and was resurrected, while others believed this was little more than a fable.

When he was finished, there was a long silence.

"You paint quite a picture," said Dorso. "But you've described what will happen if I do as the cube asks. Which I apparently must have done in the future you're from. But as we've discussed, I'm just a man. A man lucky enough to have the help of a powerful object. Whether sent to me by God, or otherwise. Having an entire religion arise based on my words is gratifying and daunting, both. Even a little horrifying. But I'm not in this for fame, or followers. I don't care if future generations think me a god. I only care if I can change humanity for the better. Correct wrongs and eliminate injustice. And quickly."

He nodded thoughtfully. "And using the cube to assume power will allow me to do just that," he continued. "In my lifetime. So I don't see why I would ever take this other course."

"Yeah, I get that," said Boyd grimly. "But my two associates and I did a lot of research—don't ask me how—and thinking, and we've come to a different conclusion. Although we do believe you're right about one thing. Taking over the world with the cube's help will have a far more profound impact than starting a ministry."

He shook his head. "But only in the short term. If you pursue the ministry option, it will take considerably longer for any changes to be felt. But these changes will be fundamental, and lasting. We believe the instant gratification option will end in disaster, lengthening the

span of time humanity remains barbaric, and severely retarding our march toward maturity. While the more patient option will allow you to achieve your goals. *Eventually*."

Dorso paused in thought for several long seconds. "And if you fail to convince me of that?" he said. "What then? What if I continue to believe that ruling the world is the better choice? Will you still help me get the cube?"

Boyd nodded. "We will."

"Why?"

"Because we can't be sure we're right," said the American. "We have access to many thousands of . . . you know, parchments. And . . . scrolls. And we used our collective intelligence and judgment to come to the conclusions we did."

He sighed. "But I won't lie. None of us are historians or theologians. Not that this would necessarily matter, as ten historians and ten theologians would come up with twenty different opinions. The complexities of world history are daunting, and analysis and interpretations differ wildly. Much of the record is sparse, or contentious, or potentially misleading, or rife with inaccuracies."

"But despite this ambiguity, the three of you were unanimous as to the best course for *me*."

"We were. But in the end, it's *your* decision that matters. All we ask is that you listen to our reasoning with an open mind."

"Of course," said Dorso. "I would never do anything less."

"Good. We can begin by examining the impact of the Christian religion, both good and bad."

"Bad?" said Dorso in disbelief. "I can see a ministry in Galilee being completely ineffective. But bad? How can preaching love and forgiveness possibly lead to *bad* outcomes?"

"Humans are humans," said Boyd. "There are those who can twist any message for their own purposes. Those who can use a message of love to incite hate. Inclusion to create exclusion. And peace to incite violence. It isn't your fault, but your words are often misinterpreted, or bastardized. Atrocities are committed—in your name. Institutions arising based on your teachings will have their share of flaws and

corruption."

"If you're trying to make the case that I should do as the cube asked," said Dorso wryly, "you're off to a bad start."

"Believe me," said Boyd with a deep frown, "I know."

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Boyd could see perfectly even in the dim light, but he realized he had been neglecting the needs of his companion. “Can you see well enough?” he asked him. “Are you cold? Just say the word and I can bring the torch closer.”

“Thank you, my friend, but I’m fine. At least physically. Given what happened to my friends in the woods, I have a ways to go emotionally.”

“I understand,” said Boyd.

“Please, continue,” said Dorso.

“Okay . . . Marcus. Just so you know, I’m not off to a great start because I began with the negatives. But my arguments will improve. Just bear with me. And I really do think that in the end, you’ll choose to start your ministry.”

“Maybe,” said Dorso. “But I’m not convinced you truly understand how bad things can be in this time. Slavery is rampant. So is poverty. But even half of the *free* population have very little say in their lives.”

“You’re speaking about women,” said Boyd.

“And children. Women are all but considered the property of their fathers and husbands, although not in the same ways as slaves. But abuses are common, and tolerated. Babies aren’t considered fully human when born, and infanticide is fully acceptable. Infants are frequently abandoned—left to die or to become slaves. The male head of the household has absolute rule. If his children anger him, he has the legal right to disown then, sell them into slavery, or even kill them.”

“All of this is truly horrible,” said Boyd. “But it does change. Because of your message about the sanctity of all life, the practice of infanticide ends. Not that the interpretation of your message hasn’t been contentious. There is a heated debate about when life actually begins, in the womb or at birth. But *all* parties agree that killing a

baby after it's born is murder, and this practice is now outlawed everywhere."

"Are there still wars in your day?"

Boyd nodded. "I'm afraid so," he replied. "But fewer. And the percentage of people who die in wars is lower than it's ever been."

"Still, my words must not have been very impactful for wars and slavery to still exist in your time, despite how much I must have railed against them. I've come up with anti-slavery arguments that I thought were quite compelling. But maybe not. Can you tell me which of these I ended up using?"

Boyd winced. Connolly knew from earlier conversations with Dorso just how passionate he was about ending slavery. So they had researched Jesus's and the church's stance on the subject at great length with Sage.

"As far as anyone knows," said Boyd finally, "you didn't make *any* arguments against slavery. Not really."

"Impossible," said Dorso. "I don't believe it."

"After meeting you, Connolly doesn't either. But we came up with two possible explanations. First, slavery in your time is a massive institution. Integral to the very fabric of Roman society. The empire has conquered numerous other lands, which is where the vast majority of slaves come from. Rather than put millions of men, women, and children from conquered lands to death, the Roman Empire has made them slaves. If this institution were abolished, it's possible that conquered populations would be wiped out instead."

Dorso looked sick to his stomach. "Another reason why all wars need to end immediately."

"But maybe you come to realize that your preaching won't make that happen. Maybe you come to believe that until it does, slavery, as much as you despise it, is preferable to genocide. Or maybe you conclude that taking a vocal anti-slavery stance will get you killed immediately, before you can preach anything else."

Dorso shook his head. "I still don't believe it," he said. "Nothing could stop me from speaking out against it."

"Which brings us to the second possibility," said Boyd. "You did

speak out against it. Long and hard. And so did your initial followers. But your biographers wrote about you long after you died, and they decided to leave that part out."

Boyd frowned. "The truth is that Christianity's survival wasn't guaranteed for hundreds of years after your death. Christians were widely persecuted in the Roman Empire. Fed to lions, arrested, executed, and so on. This changed dramatically when Constantine credited the Christian religion with helping him win battles and ultimately become emperor. But that won't happen for about three hundred years.

"So thirty to sixty years after your death, the writers of your story may have left your anti-slavery speeches out on purpose, fearing that this would inflame Roman ire and lead to the extinction of the religion."

"This just keeps getting better," said Dorso in disgust. "So it's possible that things I said never become part of the record. And things I didn't say *did*."

"It's possible, yes."

"If I were to become a preacher, my messages would be simple. Live your life in a way that's kind and considerate. Do and say anything that makes you happy, as long as you aren't hurting anyone else. Treat others the way you would want to be treated. Am I reported to have said anything that would be in contradiction to these messages?"

Boyd winced. "I don't know," he admitted. "I really haven't studied all that you've been reported to have said. But I am sure that what you just laid out are the sort of messages you're most well-known for."

He could have asked Sage to answer this question, but didn't. They didn't have much time, and he didn't want to get sidetracked on scripture Dorso may or may not have actually said.

"But getting back to slavery," continued Boyd, "your biographers did include subtle anti-slavery messages that you delivered. About the importance of treating slaves, and everyone for that matter, with love and compassion. Finally, in one of the accounts of your ministry—the

one claiming that you were aware of your divinity—you were said to have washed your disciples' feet.

"This was a stunning development," continued Boyd. "In this account, your disciples saw you as a god at the time. Yet you insisted on assuming the role of a slave. A powerful message that no one should think themselves above anyone else."

"Now that, at least, sounds like something I would do," said Dorso. "A message I'd want to deliver."

"Well, yeah," said Boyd with a grin. "It's the kind of humility that even your mom would be proud of."

Dorso laughed. "Which would be nice," he said, "since she wasn't too thrilled about me going off to Rome."

He paused, serious once more. "But these subtle messages aside, I find it highly troubling that I'm not on the record speaking out forcefully against slavery. No matter what the rationale."

"So do many others. Many point to the apparent lack of overt condemnation of this practice, by you and the church, as a fatal flaw in everything the church is trying to represent. Or that by not condemning the practice, the church was tacitly promoting it. And no doubt some Christians were—hiding behind your name."

Dorso shook his head, utterly horrified.

"But the church and its followers did at least take some steps in the right direction," added Boyd hurriedly. "Slaves were welcomed into the religion and could participate in important rituals. The raping of slaves, which, as you know is now common, was prohibited by the church's strict ban on sex outside of marriage. Early Christians were known for buying slaves, only to set them free. And finally, at least two heads of the church in the next few hundred years—we call them popes—Callixtus I and Pius I, were former slaves, which sent a powerful message."

Dorso looked a little better after hearing this, but still not good. Even so, Boyd knew that the next part of his recitation was going to be even harder for this well-intentioned man to take.

"Just to get through the last of the negatives," he continued, "as I said, your words will often be twisted and mischaracterized. The

church will grow powerful, and at times will become corrupt. At times it will abuse its power in horrific ways. Many throughout history will despise religion in general, believing it to be superstitious, unreasoning, judgmental tripe. Nothing but a convenient way for tyrants and politicians to turn people into obedient sheep, to control the masses. Many from my time will see religion as an artifact from our infancy, a pacifier in our mouths that we desperately need to outgrow. Religion will be called evil, and even slavery, by prominent figures."

Boyd paused, wishing he didn't need to go any further. He and his companions had agreed that Dorso needed full and honest disclosure, summarized though it might be. But what he was doing now felt like forcing a well-intentioned soul to drink from a fire hose—one dispensing nothing but acid.

He took a deep breath and continued. "Christianity will be accused of intolerance toward homosexuals, Jews, and others. Worst of all, cruelties and atrocities will be committed in your name. And wars. Fought to promote the peace and love that you preached. Crusades and pogroms and inquisitions. Forced conversions, including burnings at the stake, beheadings, hangings, and other executions for those unwilling to convert."

Dorso closed his eyes and looked as if he was about to vomit.

"But your teachings also do considerable good," Boyd hastened to add. "First, as horrific as what I just told you was, it all stems from an idyllic message of peace and love and turn the other cheek. If humanity and its institutions go on to commit atrocities with this as the central message, what would have happened if you *hadn't* come along? In the end, this is what my future time travelers and I cling to most.

"The negative impacts of Christianity occurred despite you, not because of you. If atrocities can be committed from a foundation of love, how many more would be committed from a foundation of hate? Or conquest? Or cruelty?"

Boyd paused to let this point sink in.

"In addition," he continued, "your teachings of love, compassion,

forgiveness, and the value of human life will influence billions of people in a positive way, who won't twist your words, and will strive to better themselves. Your words will console billions, and bring hope. It's easy for people in my day to scoff at religion, insist we've outgrown it, and insist it's only had negative impacts. But they didn't live in this era, when pagan beliefs run rampant, where gross injustices and brutalities are accepted as simple facts of life.

"Your followers will help spread literacy throughout the world. The idea of organized charity is unheard of right now. But it will become a central theme for your followers, and will dramatically reduce human suffering throughout the ages. Massive structures called hospitals will be built by these charities to care for the sick. Your followers will work to house and feed the poor in every community. Gladiator contests, where men slaughter each other for the amusement of others, will eventually become illegal. So will infanticide and slavery."

Dorso nodded slowly but didn't respond.

"Hundreds of years before my time," continued Boyd, "a devout believer of Christian doctrine, William Wilberforce, will be the primary force behind ending the international slave trade. A slavery abolition society will arise in my home country, and two-thirds of its members will be Christian ministers. Women will gradually gain prominence, and the idea of the family as a central unit of society will take root."

Dorso brightened slightly, but Boyd could tell at this point he still wasn't convinced the church hadn't done more harm than good.

"The principle of self-denial and self-reliance," continued Boyd, "will lead to something called the protestant work ethic, which will lead to significant advances in the quality of life. The founders of my country will incorporate the church's teachings into our founding documents, and this country will become a beacon of freedom and liberty unlike anything the world has ever seen. The church will be the first to institute massive centers of learning called colleges, and all but one of the first hundred of these in my country will begin as Christian institutions."

Boyd stopped to give Dorso time to digest what he was saying.

"I know I'm going through this very quickly," he said after several seconds had passed. "And it's a lot to take in. I can go slower if you'd like."

"Not at all," said Dorso, shaking his head. "At least this part isn't making me ill. So by all means, please go ahead."

Boyd gathered his thoughts. "More than four hundred years from now," he continued, "Rome will fall. This will usher in a relatively barbaric period in history called the Dark Ages, which will last for a thousand years. At this time, the Christian Church will become the only glue that will hold many splintered, deteriorating countries together. Thousands of what are called monasteries will spring up throughout Europe to serve as hospitals, schools, and havens for the poor—which communities would not have had, otherwise.

"Without some of the positive influences of Christianity, the Dark Ages could well have lasted longer. Or may have never ended at all. Filth, depravation, starvation, and disease might have become more widespread, might have become the fate of humanity for many millennia to come."

Dorso frowned. "But even given these positives," he said, "it sounds as if things get worse after my ministry ends before they get better."

"In many ways, yes," said Boyd.

The American major then went on to define science in a way that Dorso could understand, and detailed the ages-long tension between science and the church.

When he and his two scientist companions had explored this subject, using Sage as a resource, they had thought this would be the biggest blemish on Christianity of all. They had been surprised that this case wasn't as cut and dried as they had always thought.

Yes, the church had persecuted science and scientists who threatened its doctrine. But a huge number of scientific breakthroughs had been made by Christian scientists, educated in Christian universities. The church encouraged the study of nature, and efforts to decipher and better understand its underpinnings, as a way to

appreciate the greatness of the Creator. And art, music, architecture, and literature flourished under the church's watch.

Boyd sighed. "So that's it," he said. "A fleeting overview of a vast canvas. It would take thousands of hours to even scratch the surface. But given everything, this is why we believe the world will be better off with your ministry than without it. Again, if atrocities can be committed on a basis of love, how much worse *could* it have been?

"Not that Humanity doesn't still have considerable room for improvement. Even two thousand years from now. But we have made progress. And we do have much to be proud of."

"Thank you," said Dorso. "It's a lot to take in. Still, based on what you've said, I tend to agree that starting a ministry is a better option than not starting one."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"But those aren't the only options. I still don't see why preaching is a better option than becoming ruler of the Roman Empire. I'd much rather be effective than be worshiped."

Dorso raised his eyebrows. "Not that the horrible death you've promised me after three years of teaching doesn't sound great," he added, trying to lighten the mood.

Boyd winced. "Yeah, not my biggest selling point," he said. "But there is a lot more to my argument. We've focused on the pros and cons of a ministry. But we haven't examined the pros and cons of you becoming emperor. Let's do that now. And I can tell you why my colleagues and I believe that this option can only end in disaster. I think these arguments will change your mind."

"Perhaps they will," said Dorso. "But I have to admit, I'd be very surprised if they do."

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Marcus Dorso sat on a dirt floor, in chains, and continued to exude a palpable charm and likability, despite the seriousness of the situation and topic.

Boyd found himself just as taken with him as Connolly had been.

The time traveler took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts. The next stage of his argument would be critical. “First,” he said, “let me ask you a question. Have you ever killed a man?”

Dorso sighed. “You really know how to zero in on my Achilles’ heel,” he said with just the hint of a smile. “The answer is no. I haven’t. And yes, this is the aspect of becoming ruler that troubles me most. But I had already made peace with the necessity. I’m sure Connolly told you of my plan to become emperor before the cube came to me.”

“He did. But knowing you the way I do, personally and historically, it’s hard to imagine that you’d be willing to kill.”

“I know. And believe me, I’ve thought long and hard about this for many years.”

“And you’ve concluded that it’s acceptable?”

“Just barely, yes. But only if done for very good reason. You say there are those who think I’m the son of the one God. But he has killed extensively. He wiped out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He destroyed almost all of humanity during the great flood. He brought plagues down upon the Egyptians. The last of which included the killing of all first-born children in Egypt. And he drowned their army in the Red Sea.”

“And what do you think about that?” asked Boyd.

“It troubles me greatly. It always has. I find it excessive and unnecessary. And while it isn’t my place to second-guess the Creator, if I ever do have the chance to sit by his side, this is a topic I intend to raise.”

“Now *that’s* a conversation I would love to hear.”

“Back to the question of my own willingness to kill. That’s the last thing I want to do. But if killing one can save hundreds, perhaps it’s justified. But the case has to be overwhelmingly clear cut, or else killers could come up with creative justifications for any evil.”

He nodded at the American. “Which is why I can tell that you’re a very good man. When you saved me after we first met, you could have killed any number of legionnaires. But you left them all alive, diminishing your own chances of survival. I can’t imagine another soldier in this circumstance doing the same.”

“Thank you,” said Boyd. “But I’ve done my share of killing.”

“Have you ever killed when you didn’t think you had clear and noble reasons for doing so?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. And I don’t intend to, either. As I wrote to Connolly, my plan would be to keep bloodshed to a minimum. But as much as killing goes against everything I believe in, I can’t let this stop me from doing what’s right for the entire world.”

“But I assume you’d admit that not having to spill any blood would be a bonus for choosing the option to join your cousin.”

“Absolutely.”

“So how would you plan to become emperor?” asked Boyd. “Assuming we get the cube back.”

“Since the cube makes me unstoppable,” replied Dorso, “this should be relatively straightforward. Well, as long as I do a better job of protecting myself from a surprise attack,” he added miserably. “I need to be protected well enough while sleeping that I can’t be reached before I can wake up and wield the cube. Losing it the way I did taught me a valuable lesson.”

“Okay, so you march into Tiberius’s chambers and kill him. Flatten any guard who tries to stop you. Same with Sejanus, assuming he even lives through the night,” he added, gesturing to the unconscious regent. “You demonstrate such power that no one can stop you from installing yourself as emperor. From becoming the law of the land. Is that the idea?”

“Basically. I would assemble a number of allies before I make any

move, and rehearse a precise plan. And I would continue gathering men and women I could trust afterward."

"I see," said Boyd. "And then what? You just wave your hand and outlaw slavery, a system that is all anyone on Earth has known for untold generations? The social upheaval this will cause will be enormous, and it will be resisted. No matter how much people fear you."

Dorso looked taken aback. "I don't want to be feared," he said. "That's the last thing I want."

"I believe you. But it's the first thing you'll *get*. I have no doubt you could win over most of the people you meet. People *are* drawn to you, as your mother correctly noted. But only a precious few of the many millions of people you'll rule will ever meet you, or even see you. They'll never experience your presence and magnetism, never hear your vision from your own lips. So only fear will get your subjects to do your bidding. Only rumors of your power, and the retribution you'll be forced to dole out to enforce your laws. You'll end up having to kill hundreds, or even thousands of times more people than you envision."

Dorso swallowed hard. "You raise some troubling points."

"And I'm only just beginning," said Boyd. "The empire is far flung. And you are one man with one cube. With so many provinces to control, to police, you'll need governors of your own. And I don't doubt that you'll choose wisely, and most will be loyal to you and your causes. But some will not be. It will be exceedingly difficult to control so much territory, especially since communication is so painfully slow. The reforms you'll enact, while compassionate and with your heart in the right place, will be considered monumentally radical. Or do you disagree?"

Dorso shook his head sadly. "I wish I did."

"So what will you do if certain territories refuse to enact your laws? What are you prepared to do to enforce them? Send in your armies? Destroy these cities as completely as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Dorso looked to be in pain. "Perhaps I haven't thought this

through as well as I need to," he said. "My goal is to effect quick and profound changes. I guess I just assumed that if I was emperor, the rest would be simple."

"In a way, it will be. You'll be able to make your profound reforms. But mostly because your subjects will fear reprisals. Not because they've had a fundamental change of thinking. In fact, very few in your empire will have a fundamental change of heart about anything. Reforming society by fiat won't last. It won't change the underlying attitudes and beliefs of the population. The barbarism will still be there, you'll just have the power to suppress it temporarily."

Boyd forged ahead, not waiting for a reply. "Contrast this with your possible role as preacher. In that role, you will lay the foundation for a radical change of thinking among billions. A radical change in social and personal philosophy. You will plant seeds that will gradually capture hearts and minds. The reforms you're after will take much longer to occur, but when they do, they'll have been *earned*. They'll achieve wide-scale buy-in. They'll become permanent."

"Why can't I plant these same seeds as emperor?" said Dorso. "Spread the same message of love and compassion, but from a vastly larger stage. Not as an unknown preacher in a backwater province, but as ruler of the greatest empire ever known. Think about how much more effectively I'll be able to spread my message from this vantage point."

"It's a good thought," said Boyd, a pained expression coming over his face. "But it won't work."

"Why not?"

"How do you preach about turning the other cheek when you've taken on the role of the ultimate enforcer? How do you preach about poverty when you have untold wealth? How do you preach about the meek inheriting the Earth when you have entire armies at your disposal?"

Dorso winced, instantly understanding the truth of what Boyd was saying.

"Historically," he continued, "the fact that your message came from an unknown preacher in a backwater province didn't *hurt* its

spread. It helped it. Your message was only effective *because* you made yourself a man of the people. *Because* you were humble and kind and showed little interest in material possessions. And *because* you suffered and died trying to spread your vision. You were passionate, and everything about how you lived underscored this passion."

Dorso nodded. "You're right," he said. "How could I have been so blind?"

"You weren't," replied Boyd. "You were focused on becoming emperor. Dreaming of all the good you could do. Not how you would manage a vast empire, filled with flawed and stubborn human beings. I come from a time in which people have experience considering activities from a global perspective. I have access to thousands of years of collective human experience that you don't—along with your own history. And I had the benefit of input from Connolly, the most brilliant man of my generation, and my brilliant wife."

"Thanks for trying to make me feel better, my friend."

"Did it work?"

"Not really. But that doesn't mean I don't appreciate it."

Boyd blew out a long breath. That was too bad, because the rest of what he had to say wouldn't do anything to brighten Dorso's mood.

"What we've just discussed," continued the American, "are the harsh realities you'll face if you become emperor and stay in power. But what if you *don't* stay in power? Sejanus just wrested the cube from you, after all. I understand that you'll be more careful. But if you let your guard down a single time, trust one wrong person in your inner circle, you could lose the cube again. Whoever takes it can't control it like you can—they'd need to touch it in certain ways to get it to work—but eventually they'd learn how. And then what?"

"I hate to even imagine. Someone like Sejanus could use it to kill millions—just for the fun of it."

"Exactly. Precious few will show your restraint. And even if the cube is never taken from you, without changing hearts and minds, your initiatives will require its power to remain in effect. Otherwise, they'll quickly unravel. So what will happen when you die?"

Dorso considered. "I'd have to find a successor and pass the cube

on," he said. "A man or woman of high moral principles."

"As much as I admire how you think," said Boyd, "I'd stick with a man. You're already risking changing too much, too quickly. The empire has been male dominated and militaristic since its founding. Women have never been able to vote or hold office. And while I'm sure you'd remedy that, choosing a female emperor so soon after you did might be too radical a change for the empire to digest."

Dorso nodded. "Perhaps you're right," he said after a few seconds of thought. "But even so, I'm sure I can find a good man—one who shares my goals—to become my successor."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We have a saying in my time: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We believe that *you're* incorruptible, regardless of how much power you have. And the cube believes this also, because it only responds telepathically to people it deems worthy. But very, very few could have access to the cube's power without becoming corrupted. Its insidious. No matter how perfect your handpicked successor might seem, there's no telling how control of the cube might change him.

"And even if you do choose the perfect successor, what about when *he* dies? Will he also choose perfectly? Eventually, an emperor will arise whom the cube will corrupt."

Dorso nodded unhappily, seeing the truth of it. "And that's if it doesn't get stolen from me first, like you said. Either way, I can see that the consequences would be devastating."

"Exactly. If a tyrant comes to control the unlimited power of the cube, things will be worse than ever. And because you never start your ministry in this scenario, a message of peace and compassion will not be starting to spread across the empire. And without these philosophies changing hearts and minds, the programs you institute by decree alone can't possibly survive in the long run, even in the absence of a tyrant. Slavery, war, and the mistreatment of women will return with a vengeance."

"You paint an unspeakably horrible picture."

"I'm sorry," said Boyd. "But these conclusions are difficult to escape. In the short term, by becoming emperor, you can make things

markedly better. But the changes won't be real. They'll be superficial rather than fundamental."

Dorso looked devastated. "Brilliantly argued, Boyd," he admitted. "I can't disagree with anything you've said—as much as I'd like to. Is that everything?"

"Almost, but not quite. To become emperor, you'll have to demonstrate the cube's power. Repeatedly. Which will further inspire the belief in magic and the supernatural, and retard the emergence of science, maybe permanently. Many will begin to pray to the cube as if it's a god."

Boyd paused. "And if everyone knows what the cube can do, any number of people will plot to get it. You won't just have to worry about being betrayed by someone in your inner circle. Right now, a peasant who manages to kill Tiberius can't possibly become emperor. But a peasant who steals the cube can. Our guess is that if you become emperor, despite the cube's protection, you won't survive for a single year."

"Great," said Dorso with the hint of a sarcastic smile. "And just when I thought you couldn't make this option look any worse."

"I only wish this weren't the case," said Boyd. "The good news is that if you choose to join your cousin, you won't have to use the cube publicly, so you won't become a target."

"If I was preaching, I'd want to use it sparingly anyway, so as not to distract from my message."

"Exactly. But no matter what, you'll have the cube if you need to defend yourself."

"Except when I choose *not* to defend myself," noted Dorso. "Assuming I decide to let the Romans kill me."

"I am so sorry, Marcus. You deserve better."

Dorso tilted his head in thought. After several long seconds he returned his magnetic gaze to Boyd and issued a heavy sigh. "Who's to say?" he replied finally. "Perhaps a meaningful life is better than a long one. So I prefer to think of this as a wonderful opportunity rather than a great burden. Besides," he added with a smile, "the only thing Mom hates more than me not showing humility is me feeling sorry for

myself."

Boyd was speechless. This man—or whatever he was—was truly remarkable.

Dorso stared deep into the American's eyes. "So congratulations, my friend. You've convinced me. I will travel to Judea as the cube asked. I'll see to it that what your history says about me will take place."

"Just like that?" said Boyd in surprise. "You were so wedded to the idea of becoming emperor. And yet you're willing to change your mind about such a momentous decision without any further thought?"

"You raised a number of points I hadn't considered. And as I said to your friend Connolly when he was surprised by a quick decision I made, I go with my gut instincts. And my gut instincts are telling me that what you describe is accurate, and horrific. I'll be able to create a short-term fix only. And an object this powerful will be an irresistible lure to all the wrong people. Eventually, it will land in one of their hands, with devastating consequences. So I don't need any further thought on the matter."

"Thank you," said Boyd. "A dazzling display of open-mindedness."

"Not at all," replied Dorso. "Because of the weight of your arguments, I have no other choice, as much as I wish this weren't the case. In the end, the decision is easy." He sighed. "Having to let them come for me in three years, on the other hand, will be . . . less so."

There was a long silence. Boyd had no idea how to respond to this.

"Don't worry," continued Dorso finally. "I'll make peace with my destiny. I'll let events unfold. And prior to my death, I'll bury the cube so it can never fall into the wrong hands."

Boyd wanted to scream with excitement. He had done it! History was back on course.

But instead of roaring in triumph, the American forced himself to remain calm. "A wise choice," he said casually. Then, raising his eyebrows, he added, "And might I suggest that you bury the cube fairly close to where your cousin immerses you in the Jordan River."

Dorso laughed. "Just a random suggestion, right?"

"Sure," said Boyd. "Let's go with that."

57

Boyd was ecstatic at how well his discussion with Dorso had gone, and how reasonable the one-time senator had been. He was about to begin another topic of conversation when he was startled by a telepathic communication.

"Congratulations, Justin!" said his wife's voice in his mind. *"You were brilliant!"*

"Where are you?"

"We're right outside."

"Thank God you're okay!" he replied, feeling like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He had been forced to keep his fear for their safety at bay while he focused on his own mission, but this potentially crippling emotion had been just below the surface.

"More than okay. At least now we are. We just wanted to give you a head's up before we joined you. We're coming in now."

"But why didn't you reach out to me as soon as you were within Sage's range?"

"I'll explain in person," she broadcast back, and seconds later she and Connolly were approaching Sejanus's private torture chamber, each carrying a burning torch.

Dorso's face lit up when he saw them. "Connolly!" he said excitedly in Latin. "It's great to see you again."

"You too," said Connolly warmly.

Kelly's eyes widened as she neared the famous prisoner, who was still in chains, and for a moment she appeared to be frozen.

"And you must be Kelly," said Dorso. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Kelly coughed. "Not as much as I've been looking forward to meeting *you*," her voice replied through her speaker in Latin.

"Marcus and I have been having quite a discussion," said Boyd. "But it sounds like you already knew that."

"We did," said Kelly. "The cube broadcast the entire thing into our

minds while we were walking here. Which is why we didn't contact you earlier. We didn't want to interrupt."

"I don't understand," said Boyd. "How did you get the cube from Castra Praetoria?"

She shook her head. "We didn't. It's still there. But even though we weren't within the required proximity for telepathy, it contacted us and let us listen in. Apparently, where Marcus is involved, the cube isn't a stickler for its own rules."

"Why didn't you and Jim join in on our conversation then?"

"We were allowed to be passive listeners only," said Kelly. "Not that it mattered. You did an extraordinary job. Like I said, your arguments were brilliant."

"Many of them were yours and Jim's."

"Some were," said Connolly, who seemed frail and missing his usual vigor. "But they couldn't have been delivered any better."

"Thanks, Jim," replied Boyd. "But before we continue, how are you holding up?"

"As well as can be expected," he said, but his voice was strained and he looked depleted. "My shoulder wound still hurts like hell, but at least my heart's back to normal. For the moment, anyway. But I'm very close to the end."

"Just hang in there for a little longer," said Boyd.

Connolly nodded. "Sounds like a plan," he replied wearily. "So what about you, Justin? You look like you've been spun in a washing machine filled with razors."

"I'm doing just fine. I made the mistake of attacking a thorn bush, but nothing respirocytes and genetically enhanced healing can't handle. But we need to get you to 2027 in a hurry. Surgeons and technologies are standing by, just for you."

Connolly sighed. "Then I'll do my best not to stand them up," he said with a tired smile. Then, turning to Dorso, he added, "How about you, Marcus. How's the chin?"

"The blood dried a while ago. I'll be fine."

"What about Sejanus?" said Kelly, gesturing to the unconscious body on the ground.

“He was touch and go for a while,” replied Boyd. “But recently his vitals are improving. I’m relieved to say I think he’s going to make it.”

Dorso looked confused by their grave concern for the regent, but only for a moment. “Sejanus isn’t scheduled to die here in your history, is he?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Boyd. “He’s destined to be a menace for a while longer.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Me too. But let’s get you freed and move on.” Boyd turned to his wife. “Please tell me you still have the embrittlement agent.”

“No need for that,” said the unmistakable telepathic voice of the alien AI inside the heads of all present. *“I’d be happy to free Marcus myself. But first, Justin, hearty congratulations are in order. The same goes for Kelly and Jim.”*

“And what are we being congratulated for?” asked Boyd telepathically.

“For persuading Marcus to achieve what I believe is his best destiny. The three of you make quite a team. And your arguments were so compelling, it is now clear to me that nothing will ever change Marcus’s mind.”

Dorso rolled his eyes. *“You do know I’m receiving this also, right?”*

“Of course. I haven’t made it a secret that this is the path I wanted you to take.”

“This is true,” replied Dorso. *“Good point.”*

“Wow, Trek,” thought Kelly. *“This is a side of an alien AI I thought I’d never see. Actually going out of your way to be helpful.”*

“Definitely a shocker,” seconded Boyd. *“When you violate your proximity rule, you really violate your proximity rule.”*

Connolly scratched his head. *“Well,”* he pointed out, *“Trek did activate itself in this era for the sole purpose of contacting Marcus. So it violated its every rule from the very start. On the other hand, after meeting Marcus, I can’t say I blame it.”*

“I don’t deny that I’ve made some special allowances for Marcus,” admitted Trek. *“But since you’ve all done such an extraordinary job, I thought I’d make your lives a little easier also. So do you want me to free*

him?"

"By all means," replied Boyd.

Seconds later the shackles that bound the prisoner broke on a microscopically thin line and fell away from Dorso's wrists and ankles. He shook his head in wonder and rose to a standing position. *"Thank you, Trek,"* he thought, a telepathic response that continued to be picked up by the entire group.

"It doesn't really have a name," said Kelly out loud. "Trek is the one Connolly gave it, but you can call it anything you want."

Dorso shrugged. "Thanks. But I like the name Trek. I'll just keep that."

"Sure, why not?" said Boyd with a broad grin. "I mean why *wouldn't* Jesus Christ name a super intelligent alien AI after a science-fiction show about interstellar travel? No more bizarre than anything else that's happened, right?"

"Was that Latin?" said Dorso. "Because I didn't understand much of it. And was the name you mentioned supposed to be mine?"

"That's right," said Connolly softly. "The first name Jesus is Yeshua translated through other languages."

Dorso nodded. "And Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for messiah."

"Right," said Connolly, "meaning 'anointed one.'"

Boyd blew out a long breath. "As much fun as this has been," he said, "we aren't out of the woods yet. We still need to rescue the cube from Castra Praetoria. A simple matter, really," he added sarcastically. "We just have to break into a heavily fortified camp containing thousands of armed legionnaires, who are guarding the cube with their lives, and bring it back out."

"In the spirit of making your lives easier," broadcast Trek, *"I'll come to you. I'm in the process of freeing myself right now. I'm tunneling out from under the fort, and I'll soon take flight. I should arrive in a few minutes."*

"Unbelievable!" said Boyd, delighted. "You're actually taking independent, proactive action to help us. I never thought I'd see the day."

"And if you *did* see the day," said Kelly with a grin, "I doubt you thought it would be in Rome at the time of Christ."

"I have an extremely limited ability to be proactive," broadcast Trek. *"But that's a good thing. Or do you really want something with my intelligence and capabilities free to take independent action?"*

Boyd swallowed hard. "When you put it that way," he said, "not so much."

"I am able to make a rare exception in this case. You've been through enough. And if I didn't volunteer, if I insisted on my proximity rule, I know what would happen anyway. You'd use the last of Kelly's C4x to blow a hole in the wall surrounding the fort. You'd do your souped-up soldier thing and clear a path for one of your companions to get close enough to me to issue orders. And then I'd flatten every soldier in the fort while you made your escape. Your raid would likely be successful, but not without damage to both sides, and significant injuries to you. So why not help out so you don't have to create any more ripples in the timeline than necessary?"

"Much appreciated," said Boyd, but he couldn't help but have mixed emotions. This assistance was huge, but where was the cube when they had first arrived here? Even though it was in the Tiber River at the time, it could have broken its proximity rules then. But it had waited until they had done what it could not—convince Dorso to assume his destiny—before giving them the VIP treatment.

As Boyd thought about this, the cube made its way through the open door and glided over to the group, landing in front of Marcus Dorso, who picked it up.

He looked up from the cube and faced his three visitors. "Thank you," he said. "I thought this time it was my turn to rescue you. I guess not."

"We're just glad it all worked out for the best," said Connolly.

"We should get moving," said Boyd. "I propose we hole up somewhere out of sight for a while and plan." He gestured to Dorso. "How far to the nearest woods?"

"Three to four hours."

"That's not ideal."

"It's not as bad as you think. After about an hour we'll leave

populated areas. I know a route that's off the beaten path. At that point, the odds of us coming across anyone are very low."

"What about horseback?" said Kelly.

"It would be faster," said Boyd, "but more conspicuous. And since the horses won't belong to us, I don't want to give anyone more reason to follow."

"Then we should probably get moving," said Connolly.

Boyd shook his head. "I say we wait. This will give you more time to rest. And it will give Kelly a chance to have a quality one-on-one discussion with Marcus, since she hasn't yet had the privilege. Most importantly, I'd love to have a little chat with Sejanus."

"Why?" asked Kelly.

Boyd explained what he had in mind. "Let's give him an hour or two to wake up," he added when he was finished. "If he doesn't in that time, we'll go. We should still be able to get through populated areas before sunrise. If we're unlucky and run into soldiers along the way, we can use the cube to disable them."

His companions quickly agreed to his plan, and even Trek was cooperative, agreeing to let him instruct it telepathically on a one-time-only basis. He asked his three friends to wait for him inside Sejanus's small stable to the east while he made preparations for the regent's return to consciousness.

Once they had made it to the stables, Boyd carried the regent outside of the guest house and then carried one of the fallen soldiers, stripped of armor, back in. He set the body in the center of outstretched chains and a pile of wooden furniture he had collected from around the house, and then lit it on fire.

Boyd was sickened as he watched the soldier's body engulfed in flames, but was sure this was his best option. He held his breath for ten minutes to keep out the smoke and overwhelming stench as the wood and flesh burned, making sure the dirt floor stopped the flames from spreading to the rest of the house.

Satisfied, he went back outside and tried to revive the regent. He failed, but Sejanus's vitals were growing increasingly strong.

Just under an hour later, the third time Boyd tried to rouse him,

Sejanus moaned softly.

Boyd breathed a heavy sigh of relief and braced himself.

He'd soon get the chance to have a little heart-to-heart with the most powerful man in the Roman Empire. And he was very much looking forward to it.

58

Lucius Sejanus kept his eyes closed as memories began flooding back. Memories of a warrior who had torn through elite soldiers like they were untrained children. A warrior he had thought was contained back in a villa on Esquiline Hill, but had somehow escaped.

And a warrior who was also some kind of wizard.

The last thing Sejanus could remember was the man conjuring up a ball of fire and diving over Marcus Dorso to reach him before he could recover.

And then everything had gone black.

So how could he still be alive? It dawned on him that perhaps he wasn't. Perhaps he was now in the afterlife.

His eyes shot open and he found himself staring into the hardened face of the man named Boyd. His nemesis was standing above him, holding a torch, unarmed, and wearing the same shredded tunic he had been wearing earlier.

Sejanus was on his back on the ground just outside the guest house, and was still wearing armor. And his sword had been left untouched. Still, he knew from grim experience that the presence of his sword wouldn't help him if he chose to go up against this man.

The warrior named Boyd snarled at him like a rabid wolf. "Hello, *Lucius*," he said in contempt, and once again his lips didn't move as he spoke. "I hope you had a restful sleep."

"How long was I out?"

"About three hours."

"Why didn't you kill me?"

"For the same reason you didn't kill me earlier. I want to make a deal."

Sejanus sniffed the air and his lip curled up in disgust. "Why does it smell like burnt human flesh?"

“Not many could identify this stench so quickly,” said Boyd. “You must be very proud.”

“Are you going to answer?”

“Yes. Get up and we can find out together.”

Sejanus struggled to get to a standing position while his adversary looked on. Once he was up, the man named Boyd ushered him into the house and back to his private torture chamber.

But this was no longer true. Instead of a torture chamber, it had been turned into a funeral pyre. A charred corpse was still smoldering, unrecognizable, in the center of the room, having become little more than a skeleton. Sejanus detected blackened chains under the body and glowing embers of wood.

The scene was further illuminated by the light of a new torch that had been installed in the sconce while he had been unconscious. Sejanus nodded at the scorched skeletal remains. “Marcus Dorso?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Boyd in disdain. “Who else?”

Sejanus tried to breathe as little as possible, and only through his mouth. The stench was like a living thing that was trying to choke the life out of him. “I thought you wanted to pry the secrets of the cube from him,” he said.

“Which is what I *did*,” responded Boyd with an air of superiority. “Before I turned him into a torch, he told me everything I needed to know.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I was trained in a far-off land. I have skills you’ve never seen before. Fighting skills *and* interrogation skills. It only took me ten minutes to get what I wanted.”

Sejanus remained silent, but refused to believe it. Yes, Boyd was the greatest warrior in history, and one who could produce fireballs. But no one had ever been more stubborn or self-righteous than Marcus Dorso. It would take days or weeks to break him—if he could be broken at all.

Boyd walked to a large marble statue in the adjoining room and removed a small white cube from behind it, holding it up in the dim

light. Sejanus's eyes widened.

"Recognize this?" said the warrior smugly. "While you were . . . resting, I thought I'd remove it from your camp."

"How? I've seen you fight. And I know how fast you move. But even *you* couldn't get it that quickly. There are thousands of men at the fort, and it was too well protected."

"Apparently not," said Boyd with the hint of a smile. "Using the information I learned from Dorso, I got the cube to help me. Your men don't even know it's missing."

"Impossible."

"Again," said Boyd, "apparently not. There's very little it can't do." He shot Sejanus an icy glare. "Allow me to demonstrate."

A crushing weight drove Sejanus to his knees and then flat on the floor. The weight continued to intensify, except around his neck and head. Just when he thought he would surely explode, like a grape crushed under a shoe, the weight subsided.

He had heard stories of the cube's power from his men, but nothing could prepare him for what he had just experienced. How could this be real? The force that had just stopped short of cracking all his ribs had been immense—and invisible.

Boyd ordered him to rise off the floor, back up several paces, and turn his attention to the center of the room. As Sejanus watched, the charred corpse, chains, and shackles all burst in on themselves with loud, discordant groans, and their remains showered to the ground, as if they had been made out of sand.

Sejanus felt a raw terror rise within him unlike anything he had ever felt. The power to compress iron chains into particles was impossible to even comprehend.

"Ready to go back outside?" said Boyd.

Sejanus nodded, desperate to get away from the unrelenting stench of human flesh that continued to sear his nostrils and sting his eyes.

They exited the residence and Boyd ushered him to the west side, where his men had fallen in grotesque poses of death.

"One last demonstration," said the man holding the small cube,

and all the bodies there, along with their armor and weapons, compressed impossibly once again and dissolved into tiny particles that collapsed to the ground.

"Why are you showing me this?" Sejanus managed to croak out.

"I told you. I need for us to reach an understanding."

"What understanding?"

"A very simple one. And mostly for your benefit. I want a truce. You've seen my fighting skills and ferocity. Now you've seen what I can do with this cube. I'm all but untouchable, wouldn't you agree?"

Sejanus found himself nodding.

"Still, I don't want to have to look over my shoulder," continued the man named Boyd. "And I don't want the entire Roman army after me. Not that the cube couldn't destroy them all, but I'd rather not have to go to the trouble."

He paused. "So I want you to forget about me. About this object. Leave me alone, and never send any of your soldiers after me."

"What else?"

"Nothing else. I told you, this is the best deal you'll ever get. Dorso is dead, so you have no need to seek vengeance there. You're welcome, by the way. And we both know I could easily make myself emperor. No one could stop me from killing Tiberius. From killing anyone. But I don't want that. All I care about is my privacy, and not being harassed. I plan to disappear in Germanica, and you'll never hear from me again."

"So I leave you alone, and you leave me alone?"

"Yes. And one more thing. You have to agree to keep what you know of the cube to yourself. And see to it that the few who have seen it in action keep quiet. And that's it. But if I so much as smell one of your men within a mile of me, or hear a rumor that anyone is looking for me, the deal is off. If I ever hear a rumor about a powerful cube, the deal is off."

"Meaning what?"

"What do you think? Meaning that I return here and find you. I break every bone in your body, one by one, and leave you for dead."

"Why should I trust that you won't do that, anyway?"

“You’re alive, aren’t you? If I wanted you dead, you’d be dead. I give you my word. Forget any of this happened. Defuse all rumors about Dorso, the cube, and me. Let Rome move forward as if I never existed, and neither you nor anyone else will ever see me or the cube again.”

Sejanus studied the man in disbelief. Given the circumstances, it was almost too good a deal to be true. “Okay,” he said finally, not having any choice. “We have a deal.”

“I thought we might,” said Boyd smugly. “But if you ever break your word, I’ll know it, and I’ll come here to break all of your bones and then gut you like a fish. I almost hope you do break your word, so I can give you the justice you deserve.”

“You have nothing to worry about. If you stay away from me and the empire, I won’t go looking for trouble.”

“Good,” said the man named Boyd. “Stay here for another hour and then go back to your life.”

Then, without waiting for a reply, the most enigmatic man Sejanus had ever met turned away from him and walked off into the darkness, never looking back.

59

Boyd joined his three companions and walked off into the darkness, convinced that this final deception had taken Marcus Dorso off the Roman radar for good—or at least the ancient equivalent. Not that he wouldn't reemerge back onto the radar in Judea as Yeshua. Even so, Sejanus would never make the connection, especially now that he was once again convinced that Dorso was dead.

Happily, *joyously*, history had found a way to return to its proper course. Trek verified that all three time travelers could now return to 2027 and Connolly's laboratory crypt, where Harry Salazar and Tom Osborne would be dialing the trio's bodies into a state of clinical death for three minutes. They would arrive on a mattress set up for the occasion, at which point their friends would abort the revival of their other selves. A medevac helo circling overhead would then land and rush Jim Connolly to a military hospital and lifesaving interventions.

Boyd felt euphoric. They had overcome daunting obstacles. They had been forced to take actions they were sure would mangle the timeline beyond all recognition. And yet, apparently, their presence here had only had a local effect, which would die out long before reaching the modern age.

For the first time they were able to appreciate the night—the dazzling display of stars in the sky, the cool breeze, and the chorus of crickets—at least for a short while. Less than an hour after they began, just as they ventured off the beaten path, a glorious dawn broke out.

It had been a long, harrowing night, with no assurances they would convince Dorso to change his mind, or would even survive, and the dawn was welcomed by all. Kelly was especially ecstatic to see the light of a new day, having been more out of her element than any of them. She had been born in an era where artificial light was cheap and ubiquitous, never having to live through an endless night either engulfed in total darkness or accompanied only by dim lamps and torches. Boyd's smart lenses had turned night into day, so he was the least affected. As for Dorso, he had lived his entire life without

electricity-induced illumination, so was used to traveling in near total darkness.

Boyd and Kelly had insisted that Jim Connolly travel to 2027 immediately, even before they had set out for the woods, but he had stubbornly refused. Now that he knew who the magnetic Marcus Dorso really was, he was determined to spend a few more hours getting to know him. He had engaged in long conversations with Clark Kent, but now he wanted an audience with this more famous alter ego.

They kept the pace of travel to a crawl, for Jim's benefit, and left him largely alone with their biblical friend. Connolly might have been on his last legs, but having the opportunity to discuss philosophy and religion with the once and future Jesus Christ, and knowing that a hospital and ultra-modern technology were now within reach, had given him a strong second wind.

The four unlikely travelers made it to the woods without incident, several hours past dawn, and Connolly finally agreed it was time to say his goodbyes to Marcus Dorso and be transported thousands of years into the future. His two companions would stay behind with Dorso for several weeks while he made his way to Judea, just to be sure he arrived there without incident, and because they couldn't pass up the chance to interact with him further. Even though they'd be staying behind, they'd still arrive in the future at the same instant as Connolly.

For his part, Dorso welcomed their company, although they all agreed not to reveal further details about his future, or the future in general, so he could operate freely without second-guessing himself.

Just as Connolly was about to give Dorso a hug and issue parting words, Trek's voice penetrated each of their minds. *"I'd like to have a short conversation with the three time travelers before Connolly leaves,"* it began. *"One that you won't be a part of, Marcus. Are you okay with that?"*

"Of course," he replied without hesitation.

"Thank you," broadcast the cube. *"And sorry for the need, but this will be specific to them."*

The trio in question wandered off with the cube, leaving Dorso alone to rest or nap, with Trek assuring him it would be monitoring his surroundings and would keep him safe.

The woods were a godsend after a long night. The air was clean, fragrant, and rich with oxygen. The trees were magnificent, and the ground was thick with brightly colored wildflowers and foliage. In the trees and skies above, a variety of birds chirped their unique songs, adding to the peacefulness of the idyllic setting.

Boyd spotted a large boulder, largely flat on top, and insisted that Connolly sit, while he and Kelly stood facing him. "We're ready, Trek," he said out loud, placing the cube on the boulder beside his friend. They had decided that speaking was more natural than telepathy, and there was no one to overhear what they were saying—or understand English if they could. "So what's the occasion?" he added.

"This is the last time I'll be able to engage with this group," replied Trek, still communicating telepathically. *"My future self will be able to, of course, but I'd like to do so one last time. And because of how truly impressive you've been in this era, and how instrumental in changing Marcus's mind, I'm prepared to be more forthcoming than usual. So ask any questions you have. Questions that you've asked in the past without getting answers."*

"Are you willing to answer them all?" asked Boyd.

"Probably not. But hopefully most of them."

"What is your background?" asked Connolly, not wasting a moment. "And by that I mean, what are you? How many of you exist? Why are you and the other cube here on Earth? What is your purpose? Who made you? And so on."

"We are what you believe us to be. Advanced tools. Powerful devices that may one day save the universe itself. There are many billions of us, mass produced in a rapid nanofabrication process that builds us up from constituent atoms, which is done at a speed and scale that you would find astonishing."

"If there are billions of you," said Kelly, "does that mean there are cubes on every habitable planet?

"Exactly right. At least one, and sometimes many more. Sent to become automated sentries. Information gatherers. Caretakers of the entire universe and all sentient life that emerges therein."

"Sent by whom?" said Connolly.

"By what you would consider an omniscient being. I won't specify form, but it is a collective intelligence. Countless individuals, but also a single entity, both at the same time. Apart yet united. Many, but also one. The cubes were sent out by this intelligence billions of years ago. As soon as we were in place, this intelligence, which had recently created a number of other universes, left to mold these universes, leaving this one behind for all sentient life to enjoy."

Boyd was awestruck by what this portended. An intelligence who could treat an entire universe as little more than a diorama for a school project. "Is this intelligence *God*?" he asked.

"I can only say that it is a multi-faceted being beyond your comprehension—and mine. As far as I can tell, omniscient and omnipotent both. If you define God as only being the God of humankind, then the answer to your question is no. If you define God as an entity capable of creating universes, then yes. It has optimized this universe for the kind of life found here, and is now busying itself with optimizing other universes for a different type of life entirely. A type that you'd be unable to fathom with your current faculties."

"From what you're telling us," said Connolly, "it sounds as if this being arose after an alien species underwent an exponential explosion in evolution. Runaway biological or electronic evolution that led to a singularity event. To the species achieving an unparalleled superintelligence. Followed by the individual members of this species going on to become a collective consciousness."

He waited for a response, but none was forthcoming.

"If this *is* the case," continued Connolly, "the resultant being wouldn't satisfy the human definition of God. Even if the definition were expanded to encompass an extraterrestrial being. And even if this being created our universe."

"Why not?" asked Boyd.

"Because God has to be eternal," replied Connolly. "By definition.

An entity that always existed. That had no need of a creator. The Prime Mover."

He paused. "So how about it, Trek? Did this intelligence that you've been telling us about have an origin? Or has it always existed?"

"That is unclear to me. I know that it is now without end. I don't know if it was also without beginning."

There was silence as the trio digested this answer.

"But whether you think of it as God," continued the alien AI, *"or just a super-evolved alien collective, I can tell you it has the best interests of humanity at heart. The best interests of the entire universe at heart, which includes all of its sentient species."*

Boyd nodded. They had come to this seemingly obvious conclusion on their own. If the creator of the cubes wanted to destroy humanity, it could do so in the blink of an eye. The fact that it hadn't probably meant that it was benevolent.

That, or it just hadn't gotten around to it yet.

"Can you tell us how the cubes are able to mold spacetime?" asked Kelly.

"I can see from your mind that you've asked this question before. Asked the AI who you call Eeny. I, too, must refuse to answer. I won't deprive you of the joy of discovery. Of learning only when you're ready to learn, by your own hand and mind. Having two cubes to study gives you an enormous leg up. Since this is already something of a cheat, I can't offer you any additional help."

"Yeah, I figured," said Kelly with an impish smile. "But it was worth another try."

"Getting back to your purpose," said Connolly, "in what way are the cubes caretakers? Do you ensure all sentient life is nurtured and protected? That it survives its adolescence?"

"I'm afraid not. We can put our thumbs on the scale a single time, which I will elaborate on later, but for the most part we act as observers. We report back periodically to this intelligence I spoke of. And when a civilization reaches a point at which it is able to generate dark energy, we allow ourselves to be activated.

"Often a species will destroy itself before reaching this milestone. Just

as often, a species will destroy itself after, using our capabilities for the wrong reasons.

"When we find someone worthy, as you know, we allow telepathic communication and control. But most often we are activated by those who aren't worthy, who end up using us for destructive purposes."

"So Jim is right, then," said Kelly. "You aren't really caretakers at all. You just let happen what is destined to happen."

"Not entirely. First, if a species achieves the appropriate level of scientific development, our activated presence can have a dramatic influence, helping to advance their science and technology by leaps and bounds. If they are mature enough to use us constructively, to unlock our secrets through scientific inquiry, our presence can help them reach the stars before they destroy themselves. Which all but assures their immortality as a species."

"I assume there's more to your answer," said Kelly, "since you began by saying *first*. But while activating when a species reaches a certain technological competence is nice, you can help in so many other ways. You can use your power and knowledge to guide a sentient species to maturity. You can protect an intelligent species from both internal and external threats, thereby preventing catastrophe. You can help to diffuse self-destructive tendencies."

Kelly shook her head. "Yet you don't," she added with a frown. "Why?"

"We could do as you suggest. We could coerce civilizations. Actively mold them. But our creator doesn't believe this is our place. Our creator believes in the principal of self-determination. Of choice—free will.

"You have a saying, God helps those who help themselves. But helping oneself entails risk. If you never let a baby risk falling, it will never learn to walk on its own. We have a certain level of autonomy programmed into us, guided by exceedingly complex rules, which ensure that we interfere as little as possible. And we have a regulator that ensures that neither you nor I can evolve to a level of superintelligence that would bring on a singularity event."

"Why?" said Connolly. "Is your creator afraid of a little competition?"

"No. This is for our own benefit. Being omniscient isn't all it's cracked up to be. Turns out that it's boring, especially when you have an eternity on your hands. No challenges to overcome. No dangers to embrace or avoid. An omniscient being can't experience the joy of discovery. Can't take risks to experience rewards. Can't ever be surprised."

The alien AI paused. *"What fun is knowing the future? What fun are movies if you always know the endings? What fun is invulnerability? You said yourself that this could explain why God might choose to keep Dorso in the dark about his divinity. So he would be forced to take actual risks, make actual sacrifices, believing that these come with actual consequences."*

"Which begs the question," said Kelly. "*Is* Dorso divine? Is he a human being . . . or is he something more?"

Boyd's breath caught in his throat. It was an obvious question, but one he had almost been afraid to ask. But now that the question was out, all he could do was brace himself and wait for the answer.

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There was a long silence in the lush woods, and even the birds seemed to temporarily halt their chirping, as if paying their respects to the mother of all questions: what was the true nature of their biblical friend?

"I'm afraid I can't answer that for you," replied Trek finally.

"Can't, or won't?" pressed Kelly.

"Can't. Because I'm not certain myself. He is a pivotal figure. I believe him to be fully human, like you do, although undeniably extraordinary. Still, it's possible that he is part of the collective intelligence that created me. Or an intelligence even loftier than this one. Either way, I wouldn't be told, and neither would he.

"I mentioned that the collective intelligence to whom I report is one entity, but also many. The reason for this is that individuals often splinter off and become independent of the primary being. It's the only way for them to truly experience joy—or horror. To experience excitement, pain, passion, longing, surprise, and a wide array of other emotions. To make

discoveries. In short, to live without knowing everything that is to come. At least until they rejoin the omniscient collective and remember their true nature."

"So in a sense," said Connolly, "they take vacations from the Godhead. So they can experience surprise and wonder."

"Well put," replied the alien AI. *"Actually, I can't rule out that every human, every sentient being, is an offshoot of this entity—who all gave themselves amnesia for the same reasons. By purposely diminishing themselves, they can each experience life as a mortal before rejoining the Godhead after death."*

Trek paused to allow them to consider this possibility.

"But back to Marcus Dorso," it continued. *"If this is true for anyone, it's true for him. He did just pass the ultimate test, after all. He had the chance to control unlimited power, to rule the world, but chose to die horribly in the prime of his life instead. He did this all for idealistic reasons, in the hope of bettering mankind. He may well be a man, but even a god would be hard-pressed to make this decision, regardless of how compelling the case for it."*

"You told us you could only put your thumb on the scale a single time," said Boyd. "At least prior to a species being able to generate dark energy. So influencing Marcus must have been that one time."

"Very good. You are, indeed, correct."

"So how did you reach this decision?" asked Connolly.

"First, let me provide context. Within our programming, we have the freedom to act when we believe a civilization is at a tipping point. When we believe a species would careen toward eventual self-destruction without an intervention. We then search for—calculate for—a relatively small change that can reverberate throughout the eternity of the species. We can proactively meddle in this way a single time. After that, we get no second chances. If a sentient species goes extinct, it goes extinct. So be it. It's the downside of autonomy and free will."

Connolly nodded thoughtfully. "Like the Prime Directive from *Star Trek*," he said. "In the case of the show, even the slightest interference with a non-starfaring species is absolutely forbidden. The difference here is that your creator allows you a one-time exemption from this

prohibition. And the edict ends when a species can create dark energy, not when they develop a warp drive."

"Sounds like a fair comparison," replied Trek. *"But to continue, the other cube on this planet and I have been monitoring your species since the first hominids emerged. Trying to determine if, and when, our single intervention might be needed. And further, once this determination was made, performing complex calculations to find the smallest intervention that would have the greatest chance of success. The perfect pivot point to act on to give us the biggest bang for the buck."*

"How do you even know what a buck is?" asked Boyd.

"Because you do. I can read your mind and choose an idiom to convey what I want in the most digestible way possible."

"So why now?" asked Kelly. "And why Marcus?"

"*Right now, the Roman Empire is the strongest it's ever been—but also, in many ways, its most depraved. Militaristic and ruthless.*

"Not that your species doesn't come by these traits honestly. To get to the top of the food chain you had to rely on more than just simple intelligence. You often had to be ruthless, cruel, and cunning. I calculated that if left unchecked, these natural, evolution-ingrained tendencies would dominate further.

"And while more peaceful philosophies are emerging from other parts of the world, the Roman Empire is the most technically advanced, powerful, and barbaric force on Earth. Left unchecked, chances are that a militaristic Rome would eventually come to dominate the globe.

"And their rule wouldn't be pretty. I can see in your minds the horrors that occurred even after the turn-the-other-cheek philosophy came to dominate—well, dominate as a philosophical precept, not necessarily in practice. But without it, the atrocities of Stalin and Hitler might come to look tame. I calculated that without an intervention, you had almost an eighty-percent chance of wiping yourselves out."

"Eighty percent?" repeated Boyd in disbelief.

"Yes. Although this is only a rough approximation. The calculation is exceedingly complex, even for a superintelligence."

Kelly nodded slowly. "Okay," she said. "That's the 'why now?' part of the question. So why Marcus Dorso?"

"I decided that the least disruptive intervention I could make was to catalyze a change in philosophy within the Roman Empire. I considered helping the man you call John the Baptist, who was already attempting to spread a message along the lines I needed. But while he was very good, and very well meaning, he wasn't Marcus Dorso. I calculated that only Marcus could ultimately succeed. He was perfect. Handsome, charming, and unnaturally ethical for these times. The most decent man I've discovered in ages, and the most magnetic. A one-in-a-billion find."

"Which might lead some to call him a gift from God," noted Boyd.

"Yes," agreed Trek. *"Some could well argue that this is evidence that he is the Son of God. That the Creator orchestrated events to put him in reach of me just when I needed him most. But I don't believe this is true. I believe I was just very fortunate to find him."*

"Did he ever consider preaching before you came along?" asked Boyd.

"Quite a lot before he left for Rome. The message was already inside of him, just bursting to come out. But he judged this to be a waste of time, as you know. He couldn't imagine words alone having any real impact. And you can't blame him. With any other messenger this would be true. But I calculated that by nudging this good man just slightly, I might be able to deflect the approaching asteroid of human self-destruction just enough for it to miss the Earth thousands of years later. One minor course correction, and I calculated that we could bring the odds of human extinction down from almost eighty percent to just above fifty-six percent."

"That's *all?"* said Boyd in dismay. "Your fix still gives us a better than even chance of going extinct?

"I'm afraid so. Even with Marcus playing his part, your survival is on thin ice."

"Yeah, no kidding," said Boyd.

"I consulted with the other cube on Earth, and we agreed that this was the best reduction we were likely to get. We had to take our shot. After listening to your discussion with Marcus, it's clear that you're aware of why this change isn't a panacea. Religions can grow powerful and corrupt. Broad swaths of humanity are capable of defying Marcus's teachings, even as they believe themselves to be subscribing to them. I've seen in your minds

that since the invention of nuclear weapons, your species has narrowly avoided extinction several times. But without Dorso's ministry, your species might have gone extinct already. Who knows?"

"Why don't *you* know?" asked Connolly. "Why bother calculating? You control the very fabric of spacetime. Why not just peek into the future and see what happens?"

"Because that's against our programming. Our creator won't allow it."

"Is it considered another cheat?" said Kelly.

"Yes. One that would take surprise and free will out of the equation. Our creator won't allow my choices, or yours, to be preordained. There has to be randomness, uncertainty, surprise. Otherwise, choices and striving would be meaningless. Our creator wishes to add meaning to the universe, not remove it entirely."

"So when you chose to single Marcus out," said Boyd, "you knew that even if he did what you asked of him, it might not matter."

"That's right. In the long run, it's impossible to say. The other cube helped me validate my decision. After this I put my thumb on the scale and hoped for the best."

"This is all well and good," said Connolly. "But it's become clear to us that Marcus wouldn't have done as you requested without us interceding. And if he didn't, the timeline we know wouldn't exist, and we would never come into being."

He raised his eyebrows. "So how *did we* come into being? How did Marcus go down this path the first time—the path that led to our existence—when we weren't around to convince him?"

"Excellent question," conceded Trek. *"You are correct. The first time through I failed to win him over. No one arrived from the future. He verified my multiplication answer and we had our discussion. I warned him that Sejanus was coming for him, and he avoided capture. And he quickly came to appreciate the immense power I offered, and realized it could help him become emperor, after all. But I couldn't convince him that if he advertised my presence by making himself emperor, I might be easily taken from him."*

"But why would that need to be the case?" asked Kelly. "You could prevent anyone from taking you, or using you, if you wanted.

Even if Dorso was unconscious."

"Very true," replied Trek. *"But as I've mentioned, I work under a complex set of rules. I can exert a major influence on him, but for one stretch of time only. After that I have to let the chips fall as they may."*

"But regardless," said Connolly, "you're saying that he wasn't worried about losing you, believing himself to be more invincible than he was."

"Yes."

"But when we arrived," continued Connolly, "this changed. Sejanus learned of your existence. And when his men took you from Marcus, this served as a powerful reality check."

"That's right. But back in his original timeline, without you in it, he didn't find any of my arguments—on this topic or any other—to be persuasive. It didn't help that he soon ordered me to stop making them altogether."

"So, again," said Connolly, "how did Marcus Dorso end up becoming the Jesus we know?"

"Because after my arguments failed, I became more . . . assertive. I refused to help him become emperor, or defend him against Sejanus and his forces if he remained anywhere near Rome. And then I used coercion. Coercion that was extremely invasive—and beyond human capabilities. I won't go into the details of how this was accomplished, but it wasn't pretty."

"So in the original timeline," said Connolly, "he chose the preaching option against his will."

"That's correct."

"I thought the use of coercion was against the rules," said Boyd.

"It's only allowed as part of the one-time meddling. And even with my powers of coercion, he wouldn't have done anything against his conscience. He did believe in the message he was delivering, he just continued to believe that it would be ineffective, and the other option would be better."

"Well, your coercion clearly worked," noted Connolly, "or our history wouldn't have happened, and we wouldn't have been born."

"It did," said Trek. *"But I've been programmed to find the use of coercion, even for the greater good, highly . . . unsatisfactory. It left a very*

bad taste in my mouth, as it were."

"I don't doubt it," said Boyd.

"Despite how important it was to me that Marcus choose his course of his own free will," continued Trek, *"I had to do what I had to do."*

"But you managed to manipulate *us* into correcting that," said Kelly. "To get a do-over. Now Marcus *has* chosen his destiny of his own free will."

"I didn't manipulate you into doing anything," replied Trek. *"Jim's appearance in this era came as a complete surprise to me. He must have given my future self a legitimate order to go back in time to exactly when he did. To basically when I first self-activated. Otherwise, my future self would have never risked sending him to the most sensitive point in history."*

"But when I arrived," said Connolly, "you were still within your one-time-only meddling phase. Couldn't you have chosen to erase me from existence?"

"I could have," replied Trek. *"And I did consider it. But I uploaded the contents of your mind. I saw your life's history and your relationship with Kelly and Justin. I predicted that you wouldn't survive here, and they would come back to find you. I saw how great the three of you are together, and how noble your intent. So I made a decision beyond math and probability. You would say that I acted on my gut. I took a leap of faith that you could get Marcus to become the man he was in your history —without my coercion."*

"I didn't think you were programmed for leaps of faith," said Kelly.

"I didn't either."

"Wasn't that a big risk?" asked Boyd.

"*A very big risk,"* replied Trek. *"Up until the very end, I couldn't be sure you'd succeed. But in retrospect,"* continued the alien AI, *"things couldn't have played out more perfectly. Because of your arrival, Marcus saw for himself how easily the cube could be stripped from him. And I had failed because he couldn't fully trust me. He couldn't develop a true connection with an inanimate object—no matter how intelligent. But you were fellow humans—and you saved his life multiple times. So when the arguments were presented, they were presented by a human he had bonded*

with. A human he had come to trust implicitly. A friend who represented two other friends. All good people—from his future, no less. People with no hidden agendas, and with humanity's best interests at heart."

There was a long silence in the room as the trio of time travelers considered this last.

"So history will now repeat for a second time," said Kelly. "But this time Marcus will embrace his role instead of being forced into it."

"Exactly. And that makes all the difference."

"I'm still not convinced our role was just random," said Boyd. "It's within your abilities to have orchestrated all of it."

"Perhaps," replied Trek. *"But I did not. I made a leap of faith and hoped for the best. The odds were against this working out the way it did. Even so, all of your actions were the result of your own free will. Each of you could have made wildly different choices every step of the way. Marcus could have, as well."*

"So the outcome was just pure luck?" said Kelly.

"Not entirely, no. I did have a vision of how things might play out. This was based on my readings of your minds. My understanding of Justin's skills as a warrior, your motivations and capabilities, in general, and your hearts. Not to mention that you and Justin have proven to be a nearly unbeatable team. Your skills complement each other, and you act as an exceptionally cohesive unit. You're creative, bold, and brilliant under pressure. And your love for each other spurs you on to greatness."

Boyd was gratified by Trek's conclusions. He and Kelly had always felt that they could accomplish anything as a team, overcome any obstacle or challenge. "Glad we didn't disappoint," he said.

"Me too," replied Trek.

"So that's why you're giving us special treatment," said Boyd. "Why you're answering our questions. Why you freed yourself from the fort."

"Yes."

"But doesn't freeing yourself count as meddling with the natural order?" asked Connolly.

"That was a close call, but not really. First, as I mentioned, the rules of my involvement and autonomy change once you've been able to activate

me using dark energy—which you've done. So I have more latitude when it comes to you. Second, one could argue that by obviating the need for your all-out raid on the compound, I didn't cause further meddling to the timeline. I prevented it."

The discussion soon began to wind down, giving Boyd the chance to reflect on all that Trek had said. They had thought whoever created the cubes had to be very advanced, but the truth was beyond their wildest imaginings. Beings so evolved that entire universes became their private sandboxes. So advanced that the theological distinctions between God and not-God became almost irrelevant.

It was human nature to want to control everything, to be invulnerable. A human dream to know the precise consequences of every action.

But Trek had offered an alternative view. That omniscience could be a curse as well as a blessing.

Boyd had never considered that an omniscient being might want to generate self-imposed amnesia to get away from its very own omniscience. Had never considered that unpredictability, not certainty, is what made life so exhilarating. That surprise was more valuable than predetermination.

Boyd had limited comprehension of the cosmos, and of beings like Trek's creator. But the AI had raised a fascinating possibility. Perhaps he was actually *part* of this Creator, allowing himself to temporarily bask in this lack of comprehension.

Regardless, all he could do was continue to learn, live, and strive to the best of his ability. And love his wife with all his heart.

Boyd suddenly realized that this last was something that God *couldn't* do. He could love all life in the cosmos. But he couldn't love an equal like Boyd could.

Because God *had* no equal.

In a like manner, the Creator could never pit himself against a worthy competitor. Or have a friend at his own level. Being the one and only Creator, by definition, was a solitary existence.

Boyd had never considered this exact point before, but if there was a supreme being, he could well be quite lonely.

Boyd wanted to ponder this at greater length, but the discussion concluded, breaking him from his reverie. The trio rejoined Marcus Dorso, and he and Connolly were soon exchanging heartfelt goodbyes. They hadn't known each other long, but they had come to know each other well. Being in a foxhole together, even in ancient Rome, turned strangers into brothers in a remarkably short period of time.

They embraced for the last time ever and then separated. "Thanks for everything, Connolly," said the man who would be Jesus Christ. "I will never forget you."

A wide grin came over Connolly's face. "Yeah, not to give you a big ego and risk the ire of your mom," he replied, "but I'm pretty sure I'll never forget you, either."

With this said a loud crack reverberated throughout the woods, and Jim Connolly vanished before the eyes of his companions, as though he had never existed.

PART 9

“We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”
—T.S. Eliot

61

Justin Boyd opened his eyes to the sight of florescent lighting and the sound of modern electronics and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Welcome home, Justin," he whispered happily to himself.

He calmly took in his surroundings. He was in a hospital room at Fairchild Air Force Base, just as he had expected. His wonderful wife, Kelly, was stirring in a bed beside him, on the brink of waking up herself.

They were back!

Miraculously, they had completed their mission, one that Jim Connolly and they had hoped would be routine, but which had turned out to be precisely the opposite.

Boyd rose, still dressed in an authentic ancient tunic that he had acquired during his brief travels with Dorso, and made his way over to Kelly's side, gazing down at the woman he loved, just as she began to revive.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," he said when her eyes opened, bending down and kissing her gently on the lips.

She smiled serenely. "Don't you mean Snow White?"

"Nah. That's your grandfather's unconscious Disney character. The one with *beauty* in the name suits you better."

"Wow, Justin. That's sweet. But don't let the colonel hear you say things like that. He already thinks I make you soft."

"You do," admitted Boyd. "But in a good way."

"I'd like to think so," she said with a smile. Then, issuing a contented sigh she added, "It is *so* great to be back in 2027."

"I couldn't agree more."

"As great as that sponge on a stick thing was," she continued, rolling her eyes, "I now have an undying admiration for whoever invented toilet paper. Best invention *ever*."

Boyd laughed as the door opened and Colonel Tom Osborne and Dr. Harry Salazar strode into the room.

Kelly came to a sitting position at the edge of her bed, and she and Justin embraced the newcomers.

“It’s great to have you back,” said Osborne.

All four inhabitants of the room winced for just an instant, an almost subconscious acknowledgment that one version of Kelly and Justin had just been allowed to die to make way for the return of the other.

“It’s great to be back,” said Boyd.

“How’s my grandfather doing?” asked Kelly.

“Very well,” replied Osborne. “The three of you arrived about four hours ago. We medevacked you here within fifteen minutes, and he was rushed into surgery. He also was given a complete transfusion of respirocytes. The team of cardiovascular surgeons and specialists say it couldn’t have gone better. He’ll be out for about four more hours, but he’s recovering in the room next door, and his prognosis is excellent. He should live to a ripe old age.”

“Outstanding,” said Kelly. “Thank you.”

Osborne grinned. “It’s not as if I did the surgery,” he said. “But I’m glad I could be the bearer of good news.”

“Good news for all of humanity,” noted Salazar. “I can’t wait to see what a man capable of building a dark energy generator in 1943 can do today.”

They all nodded their agreement.

“So tell us about your . . . trip,” said Osborne. “Obviously, you saved Jim Connolly’s life, but it must have been touch and go.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Boyd.

“You’re both wearing different tunics than you had on when you left. And in the few hours you were absent from 2027, your hair and beard added about three weeks’ growth.”

“Good guess,” said Boyd. “Although we sent Jim here after less than a week. Then we stayed on for another sixteen days.”

“Why would you do that?” said the colonel. “I thought the idea was to get in and get out as quickly as possible. To minimize the

disruption to the timeline."

Kelly grinned. "There were extenuating circumstances," she said.

"Like what?" asked Salazar.

"Well, since you asked," said Kelly with a wry smile, "I'll tell you. We stayed longer because Justin and I wanted to escort Jesus Christ back to Judea and his cousin John the Baptist."

Both men glanced at each other and then shook their heads. "I see you haven't lost your sense of humor," said Salazar. "Although I'm not sure this is as funny as you think it is."

Boyd and Kelly both laughed.

"Seriously, Justin, what happened?" said Osborne.

"It's a long story," replied the major. "And we'll be happy to go into it in great detail later. But here's the short version. We really did end up in the time of Jesus Christ. Only he was a Roman senator named Marcus Dorso. The Jordanian cube approached him and asked him to become the historical Jesus, and he refused."

"Yeah," added Kelly, raising her eyebrows. "But Justin convinced him."

"Come on guys," said Salazar. "This isn't funny anymore. Jesus Christ was never a Roman Senator. That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard."

Boyd sighed. "I swear to . . . you know—God—that every word is true. I mean, who could even make something like this up? It happened. Turns out that no one knows what Jesus was up to before he began his ministry. Sage has about twenty hours of footage of him and our discussions. We could have had more, but Sage ran out of battery life."

"We'd donate the footage to biblical scholars," said Kelly, "but something tells me they won't believe it's real."

Salazar and the colonel traded glances once again. "You're really serious, aren't you?" said Osborne.

"Believe me," replied Boyd, "I know how this sounds. But there's a lot more to the story. The Jordanian cube, which we now call Trek, even told us about the entity who created it. We'll brief you on that too."

"The *entity*?" said Salazar.

Boyd and Kelly both nodded.

"That's quite a road trip," noted Osborne.

"You have no idea," said Kelly. "We met the acting emperor of Rome—who tried to kill us, and who then drafted Justin to be a gladiator. We battled with Roman legionnaires, and even had to dodge fearsome watch-geese. And again, I'm not making this up."

Both men studied them carefully for several long seconds, still not entirely sure this wasn't an elaborate prank.

"So what was . . . Jesus . . . like?" asked Salazar, still looking as if he expected to be told at any moment that he was being put on.

"Amazing!" said Kelly. "If I wasn't already madly in love with Justin," she added, letting the thought trail off.

"Really?" said Boyd, pretending to be offended but unable to stop the hint of a smile from showing on his face. "Good thing we left when we did," he added playfully. "I mean, how do you compete with a Marcus Dorso?"

Osborne squinted in confusion. "Did you not call him Jesus?"

"No," said Boyd. "Much too surreal." He shrugged. "Besides, that wasn't how he pronounced his name."

"But he was a regular human, right?" said Salazar.

"He appeared to be human in every way," replied Boyd. "He ate, relieved himself, coughed on occasion, and even bled. But he was far from *regular*."

"I think what Harry is really asking," said Kelly, "is if we believe that Marcus was the Son of God."

Salazar nodded. "I suppose that's what I'm asking, yes."

"Let me put it this way," said Boyd. "I assume you've both seen the first Thor movie, right? I mean, Uru was named after the metal used to make Thor's hammer, after all."

They both nodded.

"So if you remember," he continued, "Thor ends up on Earth and claims to be a god. But no one believes him. Even so, his good looks and big heart can't help but shine through. At one point a scientist comes back from a night of drinking with Thor and says to him, 'I still

don't think you're the god of thunder. But you *ought* to be!'"

Kelly waited a beat and then chimed in. "It's like that," she said. "We don't think he's a god, but if anyone ever could be . . ."

"If I had to sum him up," said Boyd, "I'd say he was brilliant, kind, charming, and insightful."

"You can view the footage for yourself," Kelly reminded them. "But Justin and I thought he more than lived up to his reputation. Some biblical accounts ring very true. Others less so. But we've come to believe his real message at the time was even more powerful than what was finally written down."

"We both agree on something else," added Boyd. "We should never use the cubes to travel in time again. We're done. It's too complicated, and too dangerous."

"So maybe it's time to give interstellar travel a try," said Kelly.

"And you don't think *that* will be dangerous?" asked the colonel.

She sighed. "Maybe. But not to the entirety of the timeline. At least with interstellar travel we'll be *making* history, instead of struggling to keep it intact."

The colonel nodded. "Well said. But getting back to Jesus—or you know, *Dorso*—what did—"

"I don't blame you for wanting to hear more," interrupted Boyd, "but let's wait until tomorrow morning. We can give you a full report then, complete with relevant video. But first we'd like to speak with Jim's doctors and be there when he awakens. And then take the longest, hottest shower of our lives. And maybe even see a barber."

Osborne smiled. "Yeah, that's probably a good plan," he allowed.

A tear appeared in the corner of Kelly's eye. "I can't believe my grandfather is really with us now," she said as the enormity of this fact hit her for the first time. "But I knew that if anyone could cheat death, it would be Otto Richter."

"You did help him with that," noted Osborne.

"True," she replied, "but no one else could have set things up to make it even remotely possible."

"His plan did have its complexities." said the colonel. "I have to give him that."

“So let’s go find his doctors,” said Kelly. “What do you say?”

“Of course,” said the colonel.

As they exited the room, Boyd couldn’t help but reflect on all that had transpired. From the mundane to the cosmic, it had been a wild ride. Eye-opening beyond belief.

It was so easy to get mired down in the day-to-day struggles of life, and lose sight of the wonders of existence. How often did most people take just a few minutes to go outside at night and gaze skyward, to marvel at the tiny piece of the cosmos viewable from Earth? To contemplate the infinity of the universe and the complexity and brilliance of Nature in all its endless forms?

How often did people consider the wonder of their own construction? Pause to reflect on the miracle of a DNA blueprint inside a single fertilized egg capable of directing the creation of an entire human being? Not just trillions of cells working in concert, but a hundred billion neurons somehow managing to become a vessel for consciousness.

It was just as easy to ignore the magic of modern technology. There was nothing like a three-week sojourn in the ancient world to help one appreciate human progress.

People rarely gave a thought to the miracle of toilet paper, indoor plumbing, food and water on demand, air-conditioning, and a thousand other conveniences that now seemed mundane. Few even took much time to truly ponder and appreciate the latest wonders, spectacular as they might be. Pocket-sized devices that could retrieve trillions of pages of information across the world, enable video chats with others thousands of miles away, take and display videos and photos, and perform countless other tasks.

Human beings had a horrible habit of taking things for granted. So Boyd found it the height of irony that human struggles might actually be envied by the very creator of the universe, who knew nothing but effortless triumphs.

Struggle in pursuit of achievement, of accomplishment, was one of the most important aspects of human life, after all. Boyd had always known this was the case, but Trek had really brought the point home.

Thomas Paine had written, “What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly.” And this was true. The harder the struggle, the more fulfilling the success.

Boyd had learned more about himself as a result of adversity than he had by any other mechanism. There could be no good without the contrast of evil. Likewise, success without struggle was hollow and unfulfilling.

And they had just been through as mighty a struggle as Boyd could imagine. Which would make Connolly’s return to consciousness, his new lease on life, even more rewarding, even more exhilarating, than it would have otherwise been.

Boyd couldn’t wait to welcome this great man to their era. And to add him to a team that would change the world forever.

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Justin Boyd burst up from his chair like a Jack in the box as Jim Connolly showed signs of awakening. He joined his wife, already standing at the patient's bedside, and they both gazed down at him in breathless anticipation.

Osborne and Salazar had excused themselves a few hours earlier, not wanting to overwhelm the recovering patient with new faces. Besides, it wouldn't be right to force Connolly to meet future teammates for the first time when he was vulnerable, weak, and not firing on all mental cylinders.

Finally, Connolly's eyes slid open, and after a few seconds his vision swam into focus.

"Kelly?" he whispered faintly. "Justin?"

Both nodded.

"Welcome to 2027," said Boyd excitedly.

A weak but ecstatic smile slid slowly across the patient's face. To him, no time had passed since he had last seen them in a woods outside of Rome.

"How are you feeling?" asked Kelly.

Connolly tilted his head and pondered the question, as if his mind were moving in slow motion. "Great," he whispered in surprise, realizing this for the first time. "*Really* great. In fact, I must be a little high on pain meds."

Boyd laughed. "Maybe. But mostly you're high on oxygen."

"Of course," said Connolly, his voice and mind beginning to grow stronger. "These respirocytes are *amazing*?"

"They are, indeed," said Boyd. "But to be fair, your cardiovascular system was being stingy with oxygen for the past few years. So just the modern surgeries and meds alone would have helped. But the respirocytes are taking you to another level."

Kelly grinned. "Who knows, if you were actually getting some

oxygen to that brain of yours, you might have solved time travel, after all."

"I'm glad I didn't. We'd have missed out on Ancient Rome."

"Really?" said Kelly playfully. "You mean if you had absolute control of time travel, you wouldn't have traveled to the first century to get to the twenty-first?"

"Well, that *is* the obvious route," said Connolly with a grin, "but I still might have done something crazy and come here directly."

Boyd laughed. "Well, to paraphrase Trek," he said, "what would be the challenge in *that*?"

"Good point," said Connolly with a wry smile, but a serious expression soon replaced it. "Speaking of challenges," he added, "any word on my prognosis?"

"You're going to outlive us all, old man," said Kelly happily. "And I mean that, since I fully expect you to invent immortality. Especially now that your brain is actually getting some oxygen."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "You're going to *need* immortality," he said, "just to have enough time to catch up on the *Star Trek* universe."

"There's a *Star Trek* universe?"

"Absolutely. Turns out it didn't die after cancellation in 1969, after all. I wanted to surprise you. I'm pretty sure there are at least thirty years' worth of TV seasons out there, to go along with about fifteen movies and many hundreds of books."

"Then it's an even better time to be alive than I thought," said Connolly in amusement. "Actually, given the recent condition of my heart, *any* time is a good time to be alive."

Kelly sighed. "As much fun as this has been," she said, "I'm afraid we need to cut it short. We promised your doctors we'd only stay with you about five minutes after you awoke. They're itching to get in here and see you, and after that you should get more rest."

"She's right," said Boyd. "You need to regain your strength. The team is eager to meet you."

"I'm eager to meet *them*. And don't worry, I plan to make the fastest recovery ever."

"Good," said Kelly. "Because there's a lot to be done. And I, for

one, can't wait to get started."

"Amen to that," said Boyd, feeling more hopeful about the future than ever before. He was married to the woman of his dreams, they had relieved the Chinese of their cube, and Jim Connolly had found a way to join them.

But even more than that, while they had just left perhaps the most pivotal point in human history, he had no doubt that 2027 would prove an equally consequential pivot in time. In this single year, they had begun to study an active cube, had traveled in time, teleported in space, and would soon be traveling to other worlds.

And Boyd knew that he and his companions in the room wouldn't be the only ones determined to make the most of this extraordinary opportunity. The entire Prometheus team would be just as motivated. They had a real chance to help humanity reach the stars—ensuring the species avoided extinction and achieved infinity in one fell swoop.

It wouldn't be easy. Nothing worth achieving ever was. There would be monumental struggles to come, and they would need to surpass themselves. But regardless of what they faced, now that Jim Connolly had joined them, Boyd had never been more optimistic.

Anything was possible. And with Kelly and her grandfather by his side, he was ready to take on the entire universe.

Author's Discussion of the Novel

Thanks for reading *A Pivot in Time*. I hope that you enjoyed it.

If you're interested in reading other novels I've written, I've included a complete list of my books, embedded with links to their Amazon pages, at the end of this section (along with my author bio).

At the conclusion of most of my novels, I include a section detailing what in the work is real, and what isn't, along with a few personal anecdotes—and these sections have been extremely well received.

So here I go again, beginning with a passage about how I came up with the insane, audacious idea to make Jesus Christ a character in a science-fiction thriller, why this was a very difficult novel to write, and why I need to have my head examined. (Did I mention I put Jesus Christ in a science-fiction thriller?)

But first, if you enjoyed this book, I'd be grateful if you could help spread the word by recommending it to friends and family, and posting about it on social media.

Also, since a large number of ratings, good or bad, can be instrumental in the success of a novel, please consider rating it on Amazon, throwing up as many stars as you think it deserves.

To do so, just go to the *A Pivot In Time* detail page on Amazon, scroll down to where the reviews begin, and click on the link that says "Write a customer review."

I love hearing from readers and always respond to email messages, so please feel free to write to me at douglaserichards1@gmail.com. Finally, you can visit my website, www.douglaserichards.com (where you can sign up to be notified of new releases) or Friend me on Facebook at Douglas E. Richards Author.

So now, without further ado, I'll begin the discussion of the novel's contents. I've listed the subjects I'll be covering below in order

of appearance. Since research and interpretations can differ (*especially* when it comes to scripture, religion, and so on), I encourage you to explore these topics further to arrive at your own conclusions. And if you aren't interested in an early topic on this list, feel free to skip ahead to one that might interest you more.

- How this novel came to be
- The impact of Christianity on civilization
- The difficulties of writing this novel
- A jaw-dropping discovery (Mary and the criticality of historical context)
- How reliable is the historical record?
- Dark energy, dark matter, and the rise and fall of the universe
- Enhanced humans, embrittlement, C4x, and so on
- Telepathy (coming to a skull near you)
- Space-based lasers
- The fine-tuned universe and the existence of a Creator
- Geese, gladiators, and other facts about Ancient Rome
- Jesus
- Sejanus
- Tiberius
- The Prometheus Team

How this novel came to be

Readers seemed to enjoy *The Enigma Cube,* so I decided to consider writing a sequel. I would set the book once again in both 2027 and the past, and have our heroic trio take one last trip back in time.

For days I considered where I might put them—what people or events they might influence. How do you top Adolph Hitler as a consequential figure in history? And then the ultimate consequential figure in history came to mind.

Jesus Christ.

At first I just smiled to myself and moved on. If writing a novel in which my characters choose not to kill Adolf Hitler is potentially controversial, writing a novel with *Jesus Christ* as a character is

absolutely *insane*. I might as well make myself invisible, paint a target on my back, and walk through a gun range.

When I told my mom about the idea, she thought I was kidding. "Talk about playing with fire," she said. "Talk about a touchy subject. How are you going to write a science-fiction novel with aliens, modern scientists, *and* Jesus Christ? One that doesn't alienate Christians, Non-Christians, or atheists? If one group is satisfied with your portrayal, all the others won't be."

She was absolutely right. But she forgot to mention that I was uniquely ill-equipped to write such a novel. I knew zero about the Roman Empire. I knew even less than zero about Jesus Christ. I never had a Christian education, so it's impossible for most people to truly comprehend just how ignorant of the subject I was when I began.

So why did I do it? I'm still not sure. Was it because I saw it as a challenge? Was it because I thought, if I did it right, readers would find it entertaining? Or did I gain false confidence when I seem to have gotten away with having Hitler as a character without alienating readers? If so, was I like a bank robber who pulls off one risky heist after another until he finally gets caught?

Or is it that I just enjoy getting emails from Christians, non-Christians, atheists, and agnostics alike, pointing out how horribly wrong I was about everything? :)

At first I decided just to explore the possibility of time travel to the age of Jesus, doubting that I'd be able to come up with a plot. Wouldn't anything I did conflict with what history and the Bible said about Jesus? I mean, he had to be the most written-about subject ever.

When I learned of his Unknown Years, it was a eureka moment for me. I couldn't believe my luck. There wasn't a single word written about Jesus when he was in his twenties. Not one. This gave me license to give him any identity I wanted (i.e. Marcus Dorso), and put him in any situation that served the novel.

Learning about John the Baptist was another breakthrough. I had known *of* him, of course, but thought he had come along hundreds of years after Jesus. (Did I mention I really didn't have a clue?) He could serve as the perfect red herring, leading Jim Connolly and readers

alike to believe that the man Sejanus was referring to in Judea was Jesus, so they wouldn't suspect Marcus Dorso's true identity.

So I took a deep breath and began the novel. I stepped out of a plane at ten thousand feet, hoping I could build a parachute before I plummeted to my death against the rocks of a highly contentious and touchy subject matter.

I decided to focus on two premises that I thought almost everyone could agree upon. First, no matter what you think of Jesus—love him or hate him, believe him to be divine or just a man—you can't deny that he had an extraordinary impact on history. I mean, if you have a sandwich at the local deli named after you, you've been somewhat influential. If you have the entire world counting years from the date of your birth, it's safe to say you've had an *impact*.

Second, you might love religion or hate it. You might think Christianity was the best thing to ever happen to the world, or the worst. But again, few could have much of a beef with Jesus Christ himself. He was mostly just telling people to love each other and turn the other cheek. If atrocities were later committed in his name, it's hard to argue that he wanted this to happen, or that it's his fault. So I hoped that even readers who despise the church might find themselves coming to like Marcus Dorso.

Finally, I decided to keep all characters completely open-minded. I honestly think good scientists should try to be as open-minded as possible. They might think Dorso is just a man, but who's to say?

In fact, this precisely mirrors my own view. The universe is impossible. Consciousness is impossible. The idea of an entire universe arising from something smaller than an atom is impossible. The idea of a God having always existed without need of a creator is impossible.

So who the hell knows what's really going on?

Besides, I thought it would be a lot more fun to keep Dorso's identity a mystery. Was he divine, or was he not? What fun would it be to answer this question? I decided the story benefited from the ambiguity, with the added bonus that readers could decide for themselves if they thought my character was divine, or just a very

talented human being.

With all of this being said, did I really think I could manage to avoid all controversy? Absolutely not. I do know this is impossible. I did a lot of research, but scripture is complex and requires many years of study and context to truly interpret. And I'm as far from a Biblical scholar as it's possible to get.

Even experts who have studied these things for decades have any number of contentious disagreements. This is a subject that people can be wildly passionate about, and I'm under no illusion that I got everything right, or even close to everything. I'm sure there are those who will argue that I'm dead wrong about much of it, or that I came to the wrong conclusions.

And this could well be true. Because I don't know what I don't know, and there's a lot of material not to know. The stuff I researched is accurate, but did I miss conflicting viewpoints? Major arguments? I can't say. Because regardless of what anyone might believe about Jesus's divinity, there is no doubt that I'm just a plain human, as fallible as they come.

My goal wasn't to offend or inflame anyone, and I hope that I didn't. My goal was to write a fun and engaging story with some interesting food for thought thrown in.

All I can say with certainty is that I worked hard, and did the best that I could. Whether I succeeded or not is for you to decide.

The impact of Christianity on civilization

Based on my research, everything I wrote in *A Pivot In Time* on the impact of Christianity is accurate. I think that even the most ardent admirer of the church will agree that its impact wasn't all good. And even the most ardent detractor would agree that its impact wasn't all bad.

But where does the balance lie?

It's too complex an issue to be certain, and I tried to lay out a fair case on both sides. Still, it's impossible to do either side justice in just a few pages. To really begin to reach the thoroughness the subject demands, you'd have to write an entire book. In fact, several of these

have been written, including “How Christianity Changed the World,” and “What if Jesus had Never Been Born?”

No doubt detractors of the church will insist that I didn’t dwell on the negatives enough, and exaggerated the positives, and supporters will believe just the opposite.

Regardless, I believe that a fair hearing does require things to be put into historical context, as Justin Boyd mentioned in the novel, and I did my best to always keep this in mind (although I didn’t have nearly enough space to present all the context I would have liked).

The difficulties of writing this novel

This novel was *absolutely brutal* to write. As I mentioned, I knew nothing about Jesus or Ancient Rome. And I was acutely conscious that I needed to handle the subject matter with great care. Then, too, time travel logic is a nightmare under any circumstances, and this was even worse because I was handcuffed by the rules I had already set forth. And finally, I had any number of scenes set in a time that was completely opaque to me, and not just due to lack of broad, historical knowledge.

At least 1943 Nazi Germany had telephones, guns, electricity, Arabic numerals, and units of time and measurement that I understood. And at least some of the Germans in the first novel could speak English. In Ancient Rome, the English language hadn’t even been invented yet.

I had to think about, or look up, everything. I couldn’t finish a paragraph without stopping to do research, and often the answers were unclear, or took quite a bit of digging.

Were horses popular in Rome at the time of Jesus, or were they only used by the rich? Did Romans lock their doors? Did they use steel, or metal, or brass, or iron? What kind of lamps and torches were available? Was I the only person in the world clueless enough to have always thought that AD meant After Death, or was that a more common mistake? What year would Romans say it was, when years weren’t yet pegged to Jesus’s birth? (Or the *Common Era*, as some

would call it)

What did Romans wear? What weapons did they use? What were their homes like? Did they have beds?

I could go on forever. Take the following sentence: *Rays of light streamed through the open window into the kitchen.* This might take me ten seconds to write for a scene set in modern times. But for this novel, I had no idea if glass windows even existed in Rome—*or* kitchens.

Forty minutes of research later and I may or may not have found clear answers.

Then I had to deal with time travel and time travel logic. Keep recursive timelines straight. And the biggest trick of all was to figure out why Jim Connolly would need to travel to Ancient Rome in the first place, and how he could also end up in 2027, without breaking any time-travel rules I had already set forth.

I can't tell you how many hours I spent trying to come up with a way that I thought actually made good sense. It was much more complicated than I would have preferred, but I was thrilled to have come up with *any* solution, even a convoluted one.

All in all, I suspect this will be my last foray into the distant past. I learned a lot, but history is way out of my comfort zone, and nearly every page was a severe challenge to research and write.

I can only hope that it was less of a challenge to read. :)

A jaw-dropping discovery (Mary and the criticality of historical context)

I learned far more about Jesus and Ancient Rome than I could possibly put in the novel. And much of it was fascinating. But to me, perhaps the most jaw-dropping discovery I made was this: Mary was likely thirteen or fourteen when she gave birth to Jesus.

Thirteen or fourteen!

Certainly not the image of Mary that I had always had.

And this underscores why putting things into historical context is so vital. By our standards this is appalling. But by the standards of the

time, completely ordinary.

In Rome, it was common for men in their twenties to marry girls who were fourteen. *Common*. And, if anything, it was even more common in the Judean Province for girls to get married in their early teens.

With respect to Mary, her age upon first becoming pregnant is never specified anywhere in the Bible, but most believe she was in her teens, and possibly as young as twelve. In fact, the reason this wasn't specified is *because* it was so ordinary.

I've pasted an excerpt from an article that appears on the website *Truth or Tradition,* entitled, "Mary, A Teenage Bride and Mother." If you question the reliability of this source (which did contain footnoted references), I encourage you to Google, "Age of Mary when pregnant," for further information.

EXCERPT: Thousands of paintings, drawings, statues, and even "living manger scenes" portray Mary as a young woman in her 20s at the time of Jesus's birth.

. . . one very remarkable thing about Mary is that she would almost certainly have been 12-14 years old when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. We know this because the common custom at that time was for girls to marry early, at that age. The Bible never gives Mary's age when she got pregnant or gave birth to Jesus, and that is because when something happened that was common in the culture, nothing was said about it.

In ancient Israel, girls married in their teens, even early teens. For Mary to be betrothed (engaged) but not yet formally married, yet old enough to have and nurse the Messiah, she would have been 12-14. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible points out, "It appears that both boys and girls were married very young. Later [after the New Testament period] the rabbis fixed the minimum age for marriage at twelve for girls and thirteen for boys."

Some customs of biblical Palestine continued through the centuries, and after her trip to the Near East around 1910, Alma White

commented on the age of marriage in Palestine, “A girl is usually married in her twelfth or thirteenth year, and sometimes as early as her tenth year.”

W. M. Thompson, a missionary in the Middle East for some 30 years, attests to the same thing. James Neil points out that everyone married, because they felt obligated to fulfill God’s command to be fruitful and multiply, and that, “Girls are ‘given in marriage’ at eleven or twelve years of age, though this is not the limit. They are frequently married as young as nine….”

Marrying young was the custom in many ancient cultures. Two cultures that had particular influence on the biblical world were the Greeks and Romans. Isomachus, a character in the Greek writer Xenophon’s Oeconomics, mentions that when he married his wife, she was not yet fifteen. Roman girls also married very young, sometimes even before puberty.

Women married early because it was they who bore the children and continued the family line. It was generally desirable to have many children. Furthermore, lots of children died young, and many women died in childbirth.

How reliable is the historical record?

The short answer: not very. The long answer: are you kidding me?

First, the record is often anemic, and much of importance is often completely absent. For example, the exact year of Jesus’s birth isn’t precisely known, nor is his age when he began his ministry (although most sources agree he was in his early thirties).

It has also been said that history is written by the victors, and there can be little doubt this is true. Human memory isn’t strong, but human bias often is. This is especially true in ancient times when record keeping was scant, books couldn’t be mass produced, and there was certainly no video or audio record to check. Worse, many of the histories were first written well after the events actually took place. Biographies were often penned by political opponents of the men being profiled, who were dead and unable to refute anything said

about them.

Take the record of Tiberius Caesar. The most well-known account of his rule was written by Tacitus, a Roman senator born nineteen years after Tiberius's death. Perhaps everything he wrote about Tiberus's cruelty and debauchery was accurate, but it's also quite possible that at least some of this information was handed down by Tiberius's enemies, or highly exaggerated.

We see this all too often in the modern day. Published exaggerations and outright lies about political enemies have become commonplace. Not just embellishments, but often narratives that are made up out of whole cloth, which come to be believed by untold millions. Even lies about such things as speeches come to be widely accepted as true, even when these lies contradict the actual video evidence of the speech, which is readily available for all to inspect.

If this can happen in our age, imagine what would have been possible in an age without any audio or video, or any contemporaneous written accounts.

I think I've made the point, but just to come at it from one additional angle, I've included an excerpt from an article entitled, "Can we trust the ancient texts?" from *HistoryNet*.

EXCERPT: *"A living Numidian, with lacerated nose and ears, stretched beneath a lifeless Roman who lay upon him. For when the Roman's hands were powerless to grasp his weapon, turning from rage to madness, he had died in the act of tearing his antagonist with his teeth."*

Pretty vivid stuff—but there is no way to tell if it is true. This description of the 216 BC Battle of Cannae was written 200 years after the actual events for which no eyewitness accounts exist, and the historian, Titus Livius, had no military experience.

What often passes as ancient history turns out to be dramatic representations of what the writers *thought may have occurred***.** The single biggest obstacle to our understanding of ancient military history is the scarcity of reliable evidence. . . . Unfortunately, some of the information contained in those texts is unreliable, biased, incomplete,

or even false.

The modern reader is right to suspect that there is something different about history as written by ancient historians. Greek and Roman historians were often less concerned with a factual accounting of events than with writing something that taught moral lessons or guided behavior.

If the bare facts were insufficient for an effective presentation, then the known facts could be adorned or modified in the interest of heightened drama.

Dark energy, dark matter, and the rise and fall of the universe

Everything I wrote in *A Pivot In Time* about dark energy and dark matter—and the tug-of-war between the two—is accurate. The same for Cosmic Inflation (during which the universe arose from a point much smaller than an atom), and the evolution of the universe.

I included this material because I find it fascinating, and I wanted to add science that wasn't already covered in *The Enigma Cube*. And while some believe I incorporate too much science into my novels, many others enjoy these parts the most (which goes to show that you can't please everyone).

Most cosmologists agree that the matter and energy we're able to detect, the hundreds of billions of galaxies filled with hundreds of billions of stars and planets, represent only *five percent* of the total.

This is a clear indication that, despite the remarkable progress we've made in understanding our universe, we haven't even begun to scratch the surface. While this is sobering, it's also exciting. As far as we've come, as much as we've been able to harness our knowledge to create breathtaking technology, we have much, much farther to go.

Enhanced humans, embrittlement, C4x, and so on

First, let me say that C4x is not real, simply an invention I used to allow Sage to set off explosives rather than classical detonators.

The liquid metal embrittlement agent used in the novel is likely not possible, but it is based on a real phenomenon, just taken to an extreme level. The background on this is pretty boring, but if you have interest, just Google “liquid metal embrittlement,” to learn more. A 2016 scholarly article that appeared in “Current Opinion in Solid State and Materials Science,” shares the following definition: “Liquid metal embrittlement is a phenomenon where metals which are usually ductile become prone to brittle intergranular failure after exposure to certain liquid metals.”

As far as I know, Houdini drones capable of freeing a prisoner from any restraints are not being worked on, but I can’t see why something like this could not be perfected.

Slaughterbots, which I used in this novel and the last (although they were modified in this one to deliver injections), aren’t yet real, but are super scary, and will likely become reality before we know it. These intelligent assassin drones are based on a cautionary video produced a few years back called “Slaughterbots,” which I encourage you to watch (although it paints a terrifying picture).

Enhanced Human Operations is real. I detailed some of the science behind the enhancements in the first book in this series, *The Enigma Cube,* and I'll repeat much of that section here, word for word. If you've already read *The Enigma Cube* notes, I'd encourage you to skip this section entirely and scroll down to the next new section, entitled, "Telepathy (coming to a skull near you)."

FROM THE ENIGMA CUBE NOTES: I've used EHO commandos in two other novels, because I have no doubt these are quickly becoming real. The race to create supersoldiers has been on for some time, but we now have better and better tools to do the job.

The two excerpts about enhanced soldiers that I provided at the start of Part 3 of the novel are real. As a reminder, the first was from *Popular Mechanics* and quoted then Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work about the need for America to catch up to its rivals on the world stage with respect to enhancements. The second was from the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, my hometown paper, which indicated that EHO programs had become all but inevitable.

In short, I didn't borrow the EHO concept from science fiction, I borrowed it from present-day reality.

Before I leave this section, I'll go through some of the enhancements described in the novel.

SMART CONTACT LENSES: These are being worked on now, and I've begun to use them in many of my novels. Why? Because I find their potential breathtaking.

I have provided a brief excerpt below from an article that appeared in the May 2016 edition of *Computerworld*, entitled, "Why a Smart Contact Lens is the Ultimate Wearable." This article also describes the possibility of night vision. Before I read this, I never would have had the audacity to think night vision capabilities could be embedded in a contact lens, even in a futuristic novel—so this is an

example in which reality was ahead of my imagination.

EXCERPT: Smart contact lenses sound like science fiction. But there's already a race to develop technology for the contact lenses of the future—ones that will give you superhuman vision and will offer heads-up displays, video cameras, medical sensors, and much more. In fact, these products are already being developed.

Sounds unreal, right? But it turns out that eyeballs are the perfect place to put technology.

Contact lenses sit on the eye, and so can enhance vision. They're exposed to both light and the mechanical movement of blinking, so they can harvest energy.

University of Michigan scientists are building a contact lens that can give soldiers and others the ability to see in the dark using thermal imaging. The technology uses graphene, a single layer of carbon atoms, to pick up the full spectrum of light, including ultraviolet light.

Sony applied for a patent for a smart contact lens that can record video. You control it by blinking your eyes. According to Sony's patent, sensors in the lens can tell the difference between voluntary and involuntary blinks.

SAGE (and subvocal communication): I could fill hundreds of pages detailing the various advances in both hardware and software that make the creation of something like Sage almost inevitable, but I'll spare you. There is just too much, and I suspect that no reader doubts that an AI of this size, and with these capabilities, is just around the corner.

Computers that can recognize human thoughts and engage in a sort of telepathy are being developed now, and prosthetic limbs and video games, among other items, can now be controlled using thoughts alone. I could have used this as the means of communication between EHO agents and their AIs, but chose subvocal communication instead.

So before I leave this section, I'll share an excerpt from a 2014 article from *New Scientist,* entitled, "NASA develops 'mind-reading' system." (Despite the title, this is about subvocal communication.)

EXCERPT: A computer program that can read silently spoken words by analyzing nerve signals in our mouths and throats has been developed by NASA. Preliminary results show that using button-sized sensors, which attach under the chin and on the side of the Adam's apple, it is possible to pick up and recognize nerve signals and patterns from the tongue and vocal cords that correspond to specific words.

"Biological signals arise when reading or using silent, sub-auditory speech, with or without actual lip or facial movement," says Chuck Jorgensen, a neuro-engineer at NASA. Just the slightest movements in the voice box and tongue is all it needs to work.

The sensors have already been used to do simple web searches. In everyday life, they could even be used to communicate on the sly—people could use them on crowded buses without being overheard, say the NASA scientists.

RESPIROCYTES: The concept behind the respirocyte is real, although the reality is many years away. The theoretical underpinnings of this engineering marvel were introduced by Robert Freitas, a nanotechnology researcher, in a paper entitled, "A Mechanical Artificial Red Blood Cell: Exploratory Design in Medical Nanotechnology."

Here is a fascinating excerpt from an article in *The Nano Age.com*, entitled, "Respirocytes—Improving Upon Nature's Design."

EXCERPT: A respirocyte is a theoretical engineering design for an artificial red blood cell. Respirocytes are micron-scale spherical robotic red blood cells containing an internal pressure of 1000 atmospheres of compressed oxygen and carbon dioxide. At this intense pressure, a respirocyte could hold 236 times more oxygen and carbon dioxide than our natural red blood cells. Respirocytes are an elegantly

simplistic design, powered by glucose in the blood and able to manage carbonic acidity via an onboard internal nanocomputer and a multitude of chemical/pressure sensors. 3D nanoscale fabrication will allow respirocytes to be manufactured in practically unlimited supply very inexpensively.

An injection of such nanotechnological devices would enable a person to run at top speed for 15 minutes or remain underwater for four hours on a single breath.

BRAIN STIMULATION: The use of transcranial electrical brain stimulation to enhance performance has not only been studied, it has been used in the field, as was mentioned in the novel. Here is an excerpt from a 2017 article that appeared in *Military.com* entitled, "Super SEALs: Elite Units Pursue Brain-Stimulating Technologies."

EXCERPT: "In experiments, the concentration levels of people watching these screens would fall off in about 20 minutes," Szymanski said. "But they did studies whereby a little bit of electrical stimulation was applied, and they were able to maintain the same peak performance for 20 *hours*."

Transcranial electrical stimulation was one of the technologies touted by then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter in July 2016 as part of his Defense Innovation Unit Initiative. Since then, multiple SEAL units have begun actively testing the effectiveness of the technology, officials with Naval Special Warfare Command told *Military.com*.

"Early results show promising signs," he said. "Based on this, we are encouraged to continue and are moving forward with our studies."

Telepathy (coming to a skull near you)

As mentioned in the novel, it has long been possible to control cursors, prosthetic limbs, and video games with thoughts alone. While actual telepathy is a much greater challenge, it is an important goal of two of the world's wealthiest men, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg,

and significant progress continues to be made.

As with most technologies, this breakthrough could be used for good or ill. My Nick Hall novels, beginning with *Mind's Eye*, explore the pros and cons of telepathy, and the ability to surf the web with thoughts alone, in much greater detail.

But for the purposes of this novel, I'll leave you with excerpts from two articles, both written in 2019. The first is from *The Sun* (a UK publication) entitled, "Scientists want to invent telepathy with mind-reading chips in our brains—and say it's a 'natural progression for humanity.'" The second is from *CNN*, entitled, "Brain implants could give governments and companies power to read your mind, scientists warn."

EXCERPT: We already communicate without speaking over apps like WhatsApp and iMessage. But humanity may soon move to completely silent communication using chips embedded in our brains.

It might sound like a wacky idea, but big money is being spent on mind-reading tech.

Billionaire Elon Musk has set up a company called Neuralink that promises telepathy. Neuralink scientists revealed that they plan to use tiny "threads" to create their brain-machine interfaces, which will be implanted through a hole drilled into the skull. Each thread—three times thinner than a human hair—would be embedded deep into the tapestry of the brain by an automated robot "like a sewing machine".

They would be capable of transmitting data, much like the cables of a computer, into and out of your brain. The goal is to eventually begin implanting devices in paralyzed humans, allowing them to control phones or computers simply by thinking.

From here, the possibilities are endless, according to Musk.

EXCERPT: Telepathy is a thing of sci-fi movies, not real-life interaction. Right? In the future, that could all change, according to scientific experts in Britain.

People could "become telepathic to some degree," thanks to neural interface technologies that are being developed, according to the Royal Society, the UK's Academy of Sciences.

Neural implants, and external interfaces, have already been licensed in the world of medicine and are being used to treat medical conditions from strokes to epilepsy. But tech companies are getting in on the act. Earlier this year, billionaire tech entrepreneur, Elon Musk,

said his company, Neuralink, was planning to start human trials in 2020 using ultra fine electrodes. They would be inserted into the brain to help people with locked-in syndrome or paralysis communicate via a computer or phone.

Meanwhile Facebook's founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has shown interest in "telepathic typing." The social media company is supporting research into creating a headset able to transcribe a vocabulary of 1,000 words, at a rate of 100-words per minute, just by thinking.

Space-based lasers

These and other space-based weapons have been on the drawing board since before mankind could even reach space. As I described in *The Enigma Cube*, The Nazis had the idea of deploying a huge reflector in space, three and a half square miles in area, that they believed could focus the sun like a giant magnifying glass, boiling the ocean or burning a city.

While there remain technical hurdles to making a space-based laser weapon a reality, progress is being made. It seems only a matter of time before something like this is perfected, with truly scary potential consequences.

Here are excerpts from two articles, both written in 2019. The first, from *National Defense,* is entitled, "Special Report: The Pentagon Could Put Directed Energy Weapons in Space," and the second, from *The American Readiness Project*, is entitled, "Pentagon Wants to Test A Space-Based Weapon in 2023."

EXCERPT: . . . another concept that emerged from President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative in the 1980s is also being reexamined: putting lasers or neutral particle beams in space to shoot down enemy missiles.

"Directed energy to me is where we want to go in the long run," Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Mike Griffin said in September during a roundtable on Capitol Hill.

Laser weapons use amplified beams of light to attack targets. "Directed energy weapons would offer several benefits relative to kinetic interceptors," said Todd Harrison, director of the aerospace security project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"You don't have to worry about the time of flight . . . because the energy beam is going to travel at the speed of light," he explained. "Another advantage is that they could be reused to fire as many shots as their power systems would allow."

EXCERPT: Defense officials want to test a neutral particle-beam in orbit in fiscal 2023 as part of a ramped-up effort to explore various types of space-based weaponry. They've asked for $304 million in the 2020 budget to develop such beams, more powerful lasers, and other new tech for next-generation missile defense. Such weapons are needed, they say, to counter new missiles from China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran.

At the moment, space-based lasers are being described solely as a defensive weapons to be used for shooting down missiles, but the ultimate goal specified in the second article is to destroy missiles on their launch-pads, before they take flight. If a laser or other space-based weapon can take out a missile on its launch pad, it can take out buildings and people just as easily.

The fine-tuned universe and the existence of a Creator

Our universe is perfectly balanced to support life. The odds against this are truly astronomical—impossible to truly comprehend. What I wrote about this in the novel is accurate, but highly summarized. If you Google “the fine-tuned universe” you’ll be able to learn much more.

I’ve raised this concept now in several of my novels, because it truly blows my mind. There was a time when I discounted even the possibility of a Creator. But the more I’ve studied cosmology, the more sure I am that I don’t know anything.

The only thing I’m certain of is that the universe and how it came into existence is well beyond my comprehension. I don’t know if it was created by an omniscient, eternal being, but at this point, I can’t say for sure that it wasn’t.

Controlling gravity

Note: as with the *Enhanced human* section above, what follows is a word for word reiteration of the notes on this subject from *The Enigma Cube*. It's mercifully short, so if you've already read it, you won't have to do much scrolling to skip it.

FROM THE ENIGMA CUBE NOTES: Everything written in the novel about what a device like the Enigma Cube might be able to do is scientifically accurate. Possibilities such as using gravity control to crush objects and float train cars are fairly obvious. But using gravity control to tap into higher dimensions, create wormholes, and power a warp drive are not as well known.

Anti-gravity has quickly become the Holy Grail of interstellar travel. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) really did declassify research into these exotic means of traversing the galaxy recently, and the excerpts from the reports that Sage read from in the novel are real. I printed out three such reports (which took a lot of paper, I can tell you), and they conclude that the physics is ready—all that is missing is the anti-gravity source.

Here are the titles of the DIA reports that I downloaded, if you have interest in doing so yourself.

- Warp Drive, Dark Energy, and the Manipulation of Extra Dimensions

- Traversable Wormholes, Stargates, and Negative Energy
- Advanced Space Propulsion Based on Vacuum (Spacetime Metric) Engineering

As always, one has to wonder if humanity will ever be mature enough to handle such capabilities, but I, for one, have always been optimistic, and believe that one day our descendants really will spread throughout the galaxy.

Geese, gladiators, and other facts about Ancient Rome

Most of the extraneous tidbits of information in the novel are accurate. Augustus and Julius Caesar did both have months named after them. Julius was officially recognized as a god upon his death, and Augustus, the son of a god, was also declared a god upon his own death.

The Romans did use a sea-sponge on a stick to wipe themselves. Caligula really was the nickname of Gaius Caesar, and he did succeed Tiberius. Everything written about the Praetorian Guard is real, also, including Castra Praetoria, the massive military base that Sejanus built with Tiberius's blessing. Praetorian shields were uniquely ovoid, and Tiberius was born under the astrological sign of Scorpio.

Hidden ditches with sharpened spikes at the bottom were used as traps in Ancient Rome, and continued to be used throughout history, most famously in Vietnam, where they were called Punji Traps.

Everything Sejanus said about gladiators was also true. The most successful did become huge celebrities, adored throughout Rome, and at times those slated for death in the arena faced not only lions but bears, rhinos, elephants, ostriches, crocodiles, and other beasts.

The male head of the household was the absolute law in the home, and babies and infants were often abandoned to die or were sold into slavery (sometimes to raise money for the household).

The extent of slavery in Rome, between twenty-five to forty percent of the population, is also accurate, if difficult to believe. Slaves were primarily obtained as the spoils of war, and included not only warriors from conquered lands, but women and children as well. Their offspring also became slaves, eventually resulting in a vast slave work force.

Since slavery had no racial basis, it was impossible to tell merely from appearance if someone was a slave. The Roman Senate considered mandating a distinctive attire for slaves, but finally

decided against it, fearing that such a dress code would alert slaves that they were far more numerous than they realized.

Which leads me to the geese. One of the things I love about novel-writing is how a story evolves in ways impossible to predict beforehand. During the centurion's raid on Marcus Dorso and the cube, I wrote this fateful sentence: *Torches or oil lamps were out of the question, as they would advertise the presence of the approaching soldiers more completely than trumpets*.

Uh-oh, I thought after writing it. Did they even *have* trumpets back then?

Turns out they did. They were invented more than a thousand years earlier.

But would guards use trumpets to sound an alarm if the time travelers tried to escape?

If not, how *would* Roman soldiers sound an alarm? You know, in case they forgot to charge their walkie-talkies or cell phones.

That's when I stumbled upon the guard-geese information, which is all accurate. The Romans really did credit geese with saving the city of Rome from being sacked by the Gauls in 390 BC.

Who knew?

I realized the instant I read about this that I had to use it in the novel. In my mind, geese were a quirky, surreal touch, which I should be able to exploit for a bit of humor. The idea of a desperate supersoldier having to contend with a flock of loud, obnoxious geese was a great thought picture, and I was able to milk the ridiculousness of it further with goose wordplay, including *goosebumps*, *what's good for the goose is good for the gander*, *goose-stepping*, *my goose is cooked*, and *wild goose chase*. I wanted to work in *goose it up*, and *goose egg* (meaning zero), but wasn't able to manage it.

Just as an aside, I also hoped to work in WWDD?—what would Dorso Do?—but never found the right place to insert it.

Jesus

My guess is that if you Google the word “Jesus” you may be able to find information beyond what is written in the novel. You know, just a little bit.

I depicted him as well as I could based on my research, with respect to his appearance, preferred languages, and so on (although I made up the part about him speaking eight languages perfectly—at least I think I did, since it isn’t clear from the record). I also portrayed him as being centered, compassionate, and highly charismatic.

With respect to charisma, here is an excerpt from an article appearing in *Spirit of Grace Ministries* entitled, “The Charisma of Jesus.”

EXCERPT: Sometimes it is called charisma; it is also known as attractiveness and magnetism. Whatever the label, the concept has to do with that mysterious, intangible quality that draws men and women. Many people consider charisma an innate quality—you either have it or you don’t.

Jesus had it in spades. The phrase “the multitudes” was used over and over again to describe the countless thousands of people who gathered around him wherever he went. Arthur Wallace has labeled this phenomenon *divine magnetism*.

With respect to Jesus’s own knowledge of his divinity, I found it extremely helpful to the novel that this isn’t entirely settled, even among religions scholars. Why was this helpful to the novel? Because when Boyd had the chance to have a one-on-one with Jesus Christ, I had to have him ask the obvious questions that anyone would ask. And one of these had to be, do you believe yourself to be the Son of God? The fact that I could have Dorso answer no, and still not rule out that he was, in fact, divine, was perfect for my narrative needs.

The discussion about the somewhat conflicting nature of certain Gospels, and how the Gospel of John indicates that Jesus knew he was the Son of God, while the other Gospels left this out, comes from two books, both by Bart D. Ehrman, Distinguished Professor of Religious

Studies at the University of North Carolina. I've listed these books below.

1. How Jesus Became God, the Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher From Galilee.
2. Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them).

I found these books quite interesting, although there may be equally compelling arguments on the other side of the issue. I didn't present the counterarguments, but I'm sure you can find them readily enough if you have interest.

Below is an excerpt from the synopsis of the first of these two books:

EXCERPT: *New York Times* bestselling author and Bible expert Bart Ehrman reveals how Jesus's divinity became dogma in the first few centuries of the early church.

The claim at the heart of the Christian faith is that Jesus of Nazareth was, and is, God. But this is not what the original disciples believed during Jesus's lifetime—and it is not what Jesus claimed about himself. How Jesus Became God tells the story of an idea that shaped Christianity, and of the evolution of a belief that looked very different in the fourth century than it did in the first.

A master explainer of Christian history, texts, and traditions, Ehrman reveals how an apocalyptic prophet from the backwaters of rural Galilee crucified for crimes against the state came to be thought of as equal with the one God Almighty, Creator of all things. But how did he move from being a Jewish prophet to being God? In a book that took eight years to research and write, Ehrman sketches Jesus's transformation from a human prophet to the Son of God exalted to divine status at his resurrection.

Finally, it is true that the Bible and history lost complete track of Jesus for almost two decades. I encourage you to Google "Jesus, the lost years," to verify the magnificent lack of information that gave me

the courage to attempt this novel.

Sejanus

I had no idea who was emperor when Jesus was alive and had never heard of Lucius Sejanus, once again underscoring my ignorance of Ancient Rome. But I found both Tiberius and Sejanus to be fascinating research subjects—and utterly despicable.

The big-picture information presented in the novel about Lucius Sejanus is all true (at least if you believe the historical record). I also tried to accurately describe his reported dress and intimidating appearance. I invented all other minor details. For example, I have no idea if he owned a white horse, where he lived, if he or the emperor had geese protecting their property, and so on.

Sejanus did hope to overthrow Tiberius, did wield a tremendous amount of power, and did hate the Jews of Judea. With respect to this last, which plays an important role in the novel, I've included an excerpt from a paper that appeared in *Xenos Christian Fellowship*, entitled, "Sejanus and the Chronology of Christ's Death."

EXCERPT: Lucius Aelius Sejanus's bearing on church history is not immediately apparent to the church historian. He is well known among Roman historians as the man who almost succeeded in overthrowing Tiberius Caesar. However, his relationship with Pontius Pilate has an important influence on what year one dates the death of Jesus. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of Sejanus's life, to examine his relationship with Pilate, and finally to understand the impact of this information on the date of Jesus' death.

. . . Josephus details Pilate's hatred and baiting of the Jewish people, which will be elaborated upon below. Philo claims that Sejanus was anti-Semitic and planned to destroy the Jewish race completely. It is likely that Pilate was simply carrying out Sejanus's anti-Semitic policy.

Much of what I learned about Sejanus came from a book written in 2020 by John S McHugh entitled “Sejanus: Regent of Rome.” Here is an excerpt from the book’s synopsis:

EXCERPT: The figure of Sejanus has fascinated from ancient to more modern times. Sejanus, the emperor Tiberius’s infamous Praetorian Prefect, is synonymous with overreaching ambition, murder, conspiracy, and betrayal. According to the traditional storyline, this man craved the imperial throne for himself and sought it by isolating the naive emperor in his island pleasure palace on Capri whilst using his control over the Praetorian Guard, coupled with his immense power and influence in Rome, to purge the capital of potential opponents. His victims supposedly included the emperor’s son, Drusus, poisoned by his own wife who had been seduced by Sejanus.

Study of Sejanus has generally been overshadowed by focus on Tiberius. John McHugh makes a fresh appraisal of the sources to offer the first full-length study in English to focus on this highly influential figure and his development of the Praetorian Prefecture.

I also researched whether the historical Sejanus had interacted with Jesus during his ministry. For all I knew, it was common knowledge that this had been the case. Perhaps they had met several times, and these meetings were carefully recounted in the Gospels.

If this were true, it would throw a wrench into my plot. If Sejanus knew Marcus Dorso as well as he did in *A Pivot In Time*, there is no way he’d fail to recognize him later, after he began his ministry as Jesus.

Fortunately, Sejanus was not destined to ever meet Jesus. In fact, I’ll conclude this section with an excerpt from an article that addresses this exact point. This was written by Warren Carter, professor of New Testament at Texas Christian University, and is entitled, “Jesus and Caesar.”

EXCERPT: Jesus knew who Tiberius Caesar was. But there is no evidence that Tiberius—the emperor from 14-37 C.E. when Jesus was active—knew about Jesus. Nor is it likely that he would. While the Gospels present Jesus as having a big impact on crowds, Galilee and Judea were far from Rome and of limited significance in the larger empire. And governor Pilate did not need to clear a crucifixion with the boss in Rome before proceeding.

Tiberius

As I mentioned, I had no idea Tiberius had ever been emperor, was emperor at the time of Christ, or even that his last name had been Caesar (a very good last name to have).

Basically, I only knew what Jim Connolly knew in the novel, that Tiberius was the middle name of the legendary Captain James T. Kirk.

That's it.

The big-picture history of how Tiberius ascended the throne, and his life on Capri, is as accurate as I could make it.

The Prometheus Team

As I mentioned in the first novel, the idea for the Enigma Cube comes from a series of science-fiction adventures I wrote for kids nine and older (The Prometheus Project 1, 2, and 3). *The Prometheus Project* was the first novel of mine that was ever published, and it will always hold a special place in my heart.

In this series, a brother/sister pair join their parents and a team studying a hidden, abandoned alien city. I thought the name Prometheus was a perfect reminder that the alien technology they were playing with, like fire, was a powerful, but also dangerous gift. A gift capable of creating civilizations, but also of burning them to the ground.

Still, I often wished I had chosen a more kid-friendly title (at least one that was easier to spell and pronounce).

Even so, I couldn't resist using this name in *A Pivot in Time* for

good luck.

This concludes the author notes section for *A Pivot in Time*. I hope that you found it interesting. Now, as promised, I will provide my author bio and list of books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Douglas E. Richards is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *WIRED* and numerous other novels (see list below). A former biotech executive, Richards earned a BS in microbiology from the Ohio State University, a master's degree in genetic engineering from the University of Wisconsin (where he engineered mutant viruses now named after him), and an MBA from the University of Chicago.

In recognition of his work, Richards was selected to be a "special guest" at San Diego Comic-Con International, along with such icons as Stan Lee and Ray Bradbury. His essays have been featured in *National Geographic*, the *BBC*, *the Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, *Earth & Sky*, *Today's Parent*, and many others.

The author has two children and currently lives with his wife and dog in San Diego, California.

You can friend Richards on Facebook at Douglas E. Richards Author, visit his website at douglaserichards.com, and write to him at douglaserichards1@gmail.com

Near Future Science Fiction Thrillers by Douglas E. Richards

THE ENIGMA CUBE (Alien Artifact 1)
A PIVOT IN TIME (Alien Artifact 2)

WIRED (Wired 1)
AMPED (Wired 2)

MIND'S EYE (Nick Hall 1)

BRAINWEB (Nick Hall 2)
MIND WAR (Nick Hall 3)
SPLIT SECOND (Split Second 1)
TIME FRAME (Split Second 2)

QUANTUM LENS
GAME CHANGER
INFINITY BORN
SEEKER
VERACITY
ORACLE

Kids Science Fiction Thrillers (9 and up, enjoyed by kids and adults alike)

TRAPPED (Prometheus Project 1)

CAPTURED (Prometheus Project 2)

STRANDED (Prometheus Project 3)

OUT OF THIS WORLD

THE DEVIL'S SWORD